



8 NEW ONE-ACT PLAYS  
OF 1938

[SIXTH SERIES]

Edited by  
WILLIAM ARMSTRONG  
*Director of the Liverpool Playhouse*

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## PREFACE

HEAVEN KNOWS it is hard enough, with every subject in the world to choose from, to write a good one-act play these days; but surely it is infinitely more difficult to be original and entertaining when one is limited, as in a preface, to a single subject, such as I am.

Like many of my theatrical friends, I subscribe to a Press-Cutting Agency, but, unlike them, I admit to reading shamelessly every cutting received. I have carefully perused all the many criticisms of the two previous books of ONE-ACT PLAYS which I have edited for Lovat Dickson, and found that one of them ended with these significant and kindly words of advice: "What a pity Mr. Armstrong spent his time telling us about the Plays he has selected! Why not let them speak for themselves? And, instead, throw out a few useful, general hints for young playwrights. One never knows on what good ground the seed may fall!" Oh, most excellent advice! "Why not?" I asked myself, "Why not?"

Consequently, I shall let these eight plays, all written by excellent dramatists, speak for themselves, and devote the rest of my preface to discussing the writing of one-act plays in general. I feel that I can now assert, without conceit, that I know a very great deal about one-act plays. During my sixteen years as Director of the Liverpool Playhouse I must have read over two thousand one-act plays. Can you wonder that my hair is not so luxuriant as it was in 1922? This Theatre is the only professional one which makes a definite policy of encouraging the writing of one-act plays, but if any reader of this preface

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decides immediately to run to the post office with a manuscript, a word of warning is necessary, for I have already sufficient one-act plays in hand to last me until Shirley Temple reaches womanhood.

For his first attempt at dramatic craftsmanship, it is the one-act play which usually attracts the young author. How few of them realise the peculiar difficulties involved in writing an entirely successful play of this nature. To begin with, a worn-out and threadbare theme is usually chosen. No one knows better than I do how difficult it is to find a story which has not been told *ad nauseam* by countless playwrights. May I tell you about the types of play I so often receive and which only result in an acute headache? A very frequent one is about a fancy-dress ball, with a young man and his girl dressed as pierrot and pierrette. Another one concerns the emotional author whose characters appear to him in a dream (how audiences hate a story which turns out to be a dream! They feel they have been cheated, and rightly.) Then there is the young burglar who proves himself in the end to be the vicar's wayward son. And I'm sick to death of Chinese Fantasies, all about willow pattern plates and a moony girl named Lotus Blossom. Also plays about Football Pools and the disasters they cause in happy households; and the lonely spinster who turns on the gas-stove exactly a minute before the postman arrives with a letter telling her she has won the first prize in the Irish Sweep. Tragedies staged in gloomy kitchens, lit by a solitary candle, all the characters being old, shawl-shrouded women, whose superb digestions enable them to consume at least ten cups of tea in less than half an hour. Symbolic plays about two children, afflicted with measles as well as adenoids, who lie in their nursery beds and ruminate on the whereabouts of their aged grandmother. (And will authors *please* note that it is no use saying "Jenny

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is five years old" while the laws of England insist that she must be twelve in order to make a stage appearance.)

One must not forget, however, that while these and kindred themes are as a rule unacceptable from the average writer, there is not one of them which could not be treated with complete satisfaction by a first-rate dramatist. Only too often, alas, are such subjects chosen by unskilled and mediocre writers, and in consequence the plays fail.

There is no time to "dawdle" in a one-act play. You must start and tell your story the instant the curtain rises, and there should be unbroken suspense until the climax of the final curtain. Too many authors occupy twenty-five minutes of their time attempting elaborate character interpretations, then, realising that the allotted time is almost up, rush to an unsatisfactory and unprepared climax. There should only be one scene and, if possible, no fall of the curtain until the end. I often receive one-act plays with three or four elaborate scene changes and with only one or two pages of dialogue to each scene, which is hopeless construction. One masterpiece submitted to me had for one of its many scenes the deck of a battleship during manœuvres, and its author hoped that the next scene, which took place in the House of Lords during a naval debate, would follow "without an interval of any kind". Characters as a rule should not require any change of costume or make-up, for too often the playwright takes little or no account of these changes in his dialogue. Yes, I know that Barrie in his perfect one-act play, *The Will*, had three scenes and his characters had to change their clothes and their make-up, but then Barrie was a flawless technician. Every "prentice playwright" should study those one-act plays of his, for they are magnificent examples of the art of playwriting. Authors

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must learn also that time cannot be disregarded—meals cannot be consumed, cigarettes cannot be smoked, nor letters written or posted—unless enough time is allowed to make the action convincing. I have nothing but envy for those actors who get the required number the instant they lift the telephone from its receiver. All these faults are very obvious and very common in one-act plays especially.

Harold Brighouse, who has written so many fine one-act plays himself, in an excellent preface to the shorter plays of an American dramatist, wrote that these had for their distinctive virtues "skill in action, vigour in invention, discipline in words". Here are ideal phrases which every young writer of one-act plays would do well to keep in mind, and I hope that my friend H.B. won't think me a lazy dog for quoting his words rather than thinking out some of my own. If, after this somewhat ribald preface, my publisher still retains my services as Editor of his annual EIGHT NEW ONE-ACT PLAYS, I will return unabashed to the assault in 1939.

WILLIAM ARMSTRONG

*The Playhouse,*  
*Liverpool*  
August 1938

# WATER PARTY

by

VERA ARLETT

Mr. Norman Marshall awarded this play first place in the One-act Play Competition of 1937, organised by the Sussex Playwrights' Club. The author has been writing plays since childhood and had many successes in Drama Festivals.

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## CHARACTERS

CHARON, "*The Ferryman*"

LUCIUS MARCELLUS, *a young Roman,*  
*called "The Superb"*

APPOLONIUS

JULIA, *his wife*

SILAS, *a slave*

PAULINA, *another slave*

FABIUS, *a cook*

## WATER PARTY

*When the curtain rises the stage is almost dark. In one subdued patch of light, made by the lantern hooked to the prow, we see the outline of an old man, standing up in his boat, and leaning motionless upon an oar.*

*Of the river itself and what lies beyond we can see nothing, for this is the mysterious river that circles nine times round Hades. It is the Styx, and beyond it lies Acheron, dark and deep; beyond that again, Lethe, with the blessed waters of forgetfulness.*

*The old man straightens himself slowly and unhooks the lighted lantern from the prow. He holds it above his head, peering round for prospective passengers. As the light strengthens, and widens round him a little, we see that both he and his boat are unbelievably old. It is a desolate shore, with a few boulders. Where the glow from the lighted lantern ends, mysterious shadows begin.*

*Someone is approaching. The boatman calls. He is CHARON, the ferryman of departed spirits. His temper is brusque, and he has no sense of humour.*

CHARON: Hurry along, hurry along! No loitering on the banks of the Styx. This way to the boat. Hurry along, please.

*[The shadowy form emerges, but does not hurry itself in the slightest. It turns out to be a young man, in the dress of a Roman Patrician, belonging to the late years of the First Century A.D. He looks at the boat and*



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*the Ferryman with something of fastidious dislike.]*

LUCIUS: What! Call *that* a boat? Oh, really! (*Flicks at himself fastidiously*) And is that the best the next world can do for us?

CHARON (*holding out hand*): Fee, please.

LUCIUS: Demands for money already? I say, this is much too bad, you know. It was the last thing I heard before I left Rome, and now it's the first thing I hear when I arrive—er—where *have* I arrived, by the way?

CHARON: Styx.

LUCIUS: Oh, yes? Very interesting. And where am I going?

CHARON: I don't know. It's not my job to decide your final destination. All I have to do is to ferry you across to the other side. (*Holding out hand*) Fee.

LUCIUS: Now, look here, my good man, let's get this straight. Why should I pay for a journey before I know where I'm going? It's quite possible I shan't want to go there, when I know where it is. You can't do things that way. It's absurd.

CHARON: Don't argue. Give me my fee, and get in the boat.

LUCIUS: Do you know, you've a perfectly rotten way of doing business? Anyhow, I absolutely refuse to pay a fare until I know where I'm going. It's only sound common sense, and I should say the most elementary of business principles.

CHARON (*losing his temper completely*): Will you get into that boat!

LUCIUS: Certainly not. It's a disgusting boat. Fancy asking a Roman to pay for a seat in *that*! You ought to know better.

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CHARON (*worried, produces a list and checks LUCIUS's name with a horny finger*): Well—you look like a Roman—and you dress like a Roman—but you don't talk like one. (*Consulting list*) But there aren't any Jews or Orientals down for this crossing. Ah! Here it is. Lucius Marcellus, popularly named "The Superb." That is you?

LUCIUS: Was. What else does it say about me?

CHARON: You're down to make the crossing at this hour in this boat, and with this company. The lists the Fates decree are never altered. You were murdered on the way home, after a feast at the house of Marcus Silanus. (*Looks him up and down*) And I'm not altogether surprised.

LUCIUS: *I* was; or else you would have had a couple of assassins here instead of me.

CHARON: I'd rather have half a dozen assassins here instead of you! They'd be easier to deal with. They'd be to type—hired and paid for, and reasonably obliging beings. I wouldn't call *you* obliging.

LUCIUS (*looking round*): Isn't there a seat anywhere?

CHARON: Plenty in the boat.

LUCIUS: I don't want them.

CHARON (*losing his temper again and threatening with his oar*): Do you mean me to *compel* you?

LUCIUS: My poor old fellow, I'm perfectly ready for a run round the Styx, if you are, *and* I'll make you run for it, too! By Hercules, I was a sprinter in my youth! And am I not the chief patron of the games, next to Cæsar?

CHARON (*subsiding with a growl of rage and dismay*): Why did the Fates decree that I must never set foot upon this shore?

## WATER PARTY

**LUCIUS** (*airily*): Don't know, I'm sure. Why do you want to? It's a vile, inhospitable place. Can't even find somewhere to sit down. . . . What's this? A boulder? Better than nothing. (*Sits carefully*) Well, I thought the world above was distinctly badly organised, but this appears, if anything, to be decidedly worse. Of course, it is very difficult for a man with a critical mind to fit in anywhere. For instance, I call these ferry-boat arrangements most unsatisfactory—*most*. (*CHARON resignedly hangs the lantern back on the prow*) I could arrange them so much better myself. But then, I'm *always* feeling that I could organise things better myself, as I told Marcus Silanus. The feast was really a failure, you know. To begin with, the cook committed suicide during the fifth course. Now that shows lack of organisation, somewhere.

**CHARON** (*consulting list*): His name's down for this journey. He ought to be here any minute.

**LUCIUS**: That's interesting. . . . I can't imagine why he did it. I must question him and find out. They had just brought in the lark pie and a dish of pastries—

[*A shadowy figure approaches. CHARON rises and holds the lantern aloft.*]

**CHARON**: This way to the boat. Hurry along, please.

[*A shrinking figure comes into view. He half crouches down on the bank. Here, obviously, is one with a slave mentality, and CHARON detects it.*]

**CHARON** (*surlily*): Get in.

**SILAS**: Yes, sir. (*Slinks to boat.*)

**CHARON**: Fee. (*Holds out hand.*)

**SILAS** (*crouching down*): Oh, sir, I have no money. I was only a slave, and they don't bother much about slaves. Why should they?

## WATER PARTY

We're not as valuable as a good horse or dog.  
And I was ill——

CHARON (*inexorably*): Fee.

LUCIUS: Don't be brutal, Charon.

CHARON: I've had my orders. No fee, no crossing.

LUCIUS: I think it's positively vulgar the way you worry people for money the moment they arrive. It isn't done.

CHARON: Well, every decent man's buried with his obolus in his mouth, isn't he? Or he ought to be. Anyhow, it doesn't matter. The fellow's only a slave.

SILAS (*wailing*): What will become of me? I don't want to wander here alone, for a hundred years. I've been lonely and frightened all my life. I want to cross to the other side. Things may be better there.

LUCIUS: Optimist.

SILAS: Don't *you* think they'll be better there? Don't *you* want to go and find out?

LUCIUS: Not specially. The horrors of hell and the delights of heaven probably exist only in the imagination.

CHARON (*snapping*): That they don't. You wait and see.

[*The slave crouches down and moans.*

LUCIUS *absently pats him on the head, as if he were a stray dog.*]

LUCIUS: There, there. Don't take any notice of him. He's obviously a materialist.

CHARON (*exploding*): What, me? How dare you! That I'm not. I'm one of the Immortals.

LUCIUS: More's the pity. Now, if I were engaging a Ferryman, with a Contract for Eternity, I should make a much better choice—especially if I had to pay him eternal wages.

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CHARON (*threatening with his oar*): If I have much more trouble with you, I'll tell them to set the Furies after you!

SILAS: Oh, sir—don't let them send any dreadful monsters here! He's a kind gentleman—I can see he is. I only wish I'd been *his* slave.

LUCIUS: My poor fellow, I was so *inundated* with slaves that I simply ran into debt, trying to keep a big enough establishment to house them all. I made the positively fatal mistake of having a kind heart. Was I ever rewarded? Not a bit of it. If a slave could die on me, die on me he did. Even the dog got mange.

SILAS: If only *I* had had the honour of looking after your dogs——

LUCIUS: As a matter of fact, I changed them to pet lion cubs a few months ago. They were all the rage then, you know. But one evening, when I was entertaining some guests, one of them bit Cæsar's great-aunt. That's the sort of luck I've always had. It just bears out what I say. There's no organisation anywhere.

[*Another shadowy figure comes towards the boat. CHARON is a little discouraged. He isn't quite so sure of himself, his fee, or his passenger.*]

CHARON: This way to the boat. (*Lifts lantern and peers anxiously*) Er—fee?

[*The passenger pays it. CHARON registers astonishment.*]

CHARON: Well——! That's an improvement, anyhow. (*Politely—for him*) Take your seat, please, and *mind* the step. (*The passenger does so*) I was beginning to wonder whether they had forgotten the deficiencies of human burial, altogether. This is it. Oh, sir, I've seen this crossing—and, altogether, it's the worst boat-load I've ferried for centuries. Why s

## WATER PARTY

LUCIUS (*unperturbed*): Were you by any chance cook to Marcus Silanus?

APPOLONIUS: No, I was not.

LUCIUS: Don't you want to know where you're going?

APPOLONIUS: Not particularly.

LUCIUS: Aren't you interested?

APPOLONIUS: Not specially.

LUCIUS: What knocked you out?

APPOLONIUS: Arsenic.

LUCIUS: How revolting. But I sympathise. I was murdered, too. Knife in the back.

APPOLONIUS: Really? How unpleasant.

LUCIUS: It was rather. Whom do you suspect of doing you in?

APPOLONIUS: Myself.

LUCIUS: What?—oh, I see. Suicide. But whatever made you choose arsenic? Lots of other things are more agreeable. . . . Why did you do it?

APPOLONIUS: Cæsar's orders. There were several death warrants flying about this week. His temper's got distinctly worse lately.

LUCIUS: Yes, hasn't it? I've noticed that, too. I had a pet lion-cub, you know— (APPOLONIUS *seems to be settling down for a long sleep. He muffles his head and face*) As I was saying, I was entertaining a few members of the Imperial Family. I say, are you listening? (*No response*) Did you ever meet Cæsar's great-aunt? The one with the nose, I mean? (*No response. LUCIUS is nearly desperate with boredom*) Look here, Charon, this ferry is a disgrace to Hades. Look at that confounded list of yours again—do. Isn't there *anyone* coming an intelligent man can talk to? Aren't there any *women* on

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this journey? I refuse to be herded with slaves and nit-wits who have no conversation. Your organisation is appalling. Why, you wouldn't be capable of organising a fish-stall.

[CHARON is getting bothered. He chases names up and down the list with his finger. A faint wail is heard in the distance. He looks up hopefully.]

CHARON: There's a woman coming now.

LUCIUS: By Jove, so there is! (*Gets to his feet.*)

[*The woman comes into sight. She seems sad, and moans and cries from time to time.*]

LUCIUS (*sitting down, disappointed*): Another tragedy! Didn't anyone on this crossing come to a cheerful end? Didn't any wantons or wags die in Rome yesterday?

CHARON: Fee, please.

[*The woman looks anxiously into the boat. Then she points to the muffled and motionless figure of APPOLONIUS.*]

JULIA: Who is that?

CHARON (*consulting list*): Appolonius, once a resident of Alexandria and until recently a close personal friend of Cæsar's. Suspected of complicity in a plot against Cæsar's life, he was ordered to pay the extreme penalty and destroy himself. Next to Cæsar, he was the most powerful, the most wealthy, and the most ambitious man in Rome. He was well-versed in the culture and philosophy of Alexandria, his native city; a man on whom all power, all knowledge, all riches, and all learning were once bestowed.

APPOLONIUS (*uncovering his face*): Who spoke my epitaph? What, you, old ghostly Ferryman? Is it only from you I have a funeral oration? "Were once bestowed!" . . . And

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now, all gone . . . vanished as utterly as the winds of yesterday. Now I have nothing—thanks to the jealousy of friends and rivals; thanks to the petty whim of a petty tyrant. Truly, as my Jewish friends in Alexandria said, “All is vanity. . . .” All my labour was in vain, none of my works follow me. . . . “For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain that we can carry nothing out.”

JULIA: Except love.

APPOLONIUS: Who spoke?

JULIA: I spoke. Appolonius— (*She extends her arms.*)

APPOLONIUS (*starting to his feet*): Who calls?

JULIA: It is I, Julia.

APPOLONIUS: Julia! What brings you here? Yesterday you were lovely and alive—you were young and warm . . . I kissed you good-bye.

JULIA (*stepping towards the boat*): Good-bye! That was the word that killed my wish to live. I could not bear it. . . . I could not live without you. . . . It was death, not life. After you had gone, I performed the rites; I left all in order, and I have come.

[*She gives CHARON the fee, and steps into the boat. APPOLONIUS takes her in his arms.*]

APPOLONIUS: Julia, you should not have done it. You were too lovely, too young, too gay of heart—

JULIA: I could have lived in my child, but I had none. I could have lived alone, and found some courage for it, but Cæsar would have married me to one of his friends, because of my royal blood. So the only way to keep my love safe was to bring it here . . . to you.

APPOLONIUS: And is love the only thing that follows a man through the grave and gate of



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death? Is there nothing else strong enough to go down to hell?

JULIA: Nothing.

APPOLONIUS: Oh, Julia, Julia! To think that I was next to Cæsar in his glory, and what am I now? Less than a legend. What are my works? Less than a pile of stones on the Appian Way. They will be forgotten, as your beauty will be forgotten.

JULIA: But they will remember our love.

*[She winds her arms round his neck. He kisses her.]*

APPOLONIUS: And they will forget the battles that I fought, and the great buildings and bridges and roads that I made—and the treatise on philosophy that I wrote. All my triumphs of body and of brain will be forgotten, but not Julia's love for me, or mine for her!

JULIA: And that is enough. Only love me still.

*[They sink down into the boat, their arms around each other, huddling together as if to keep their love safe against the dangers of the unknown.]*

LUCIUS (*who has been listening intently*): Now I call that most interesting. (*Rises and takes a step nearer the boat*) I've a good mind to join the party after all. I do hate to leave a story in the middle, and I want to know what's going to happen to those two——

SILAS (*clutching him*): Please, please, don't go and leave me here! You're good and kind and brave—I've never met anyone so kind to a slave before. Don't leave me alone. They might set the Furies on me. They turned the hunting dogs loose on me once—— (*Shudders.*)

LUCIUS (*patting his head*): Poor chap! What a shame! But I daresay I've got the fee on me, if

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you really want to get to the other side so much.

CHARON: It's no use. It's not transferable.

LUCIUS: Oh, blast you, Charon! This is the worst-run ferry business I've ever struck. If this was the last world instead of the next, you'd be *sacked*. The first thing I should do if I crossed would be to complain about you to the authorities.

CHARON: You wait. They're soon going to have a few complaints about you.

LUCIUS (*sitting down*): All right. Go ahead. I don't care. Cut the moorings and take your leaky old tub out of my sight. I should be glad to see the last of it. It has no æsthetic value—none whatever.

[SILAS *creeps across, and sits on the ground, up against LUCIUS's feet. Occasionally, LUCIUS gives him a reassuring pat.*]

SILAS: Oh, sir! I don't know how you dare answer him the way you do! It's wonderful to hear you.

LUCIUS: H'm. It's just my impudent tongue, you know. I never could keep it in order. "The tongue can no man tame, it is an unruly evil," as my Jewish friends used to quote at me. No—it wasn't the Jews either; it was one of those new-fangled sects, Christians, I think they call themselves.

SILAS: They preach that all men are brothers, and have God for Father. There is neither bond nor free, they say. Your pardon, sir. I was only quoting.

LUCIUS: It's a new and original point of view, anyhow, and I like to memorise an apt quotation, or a startling one. (*Another shadowy form appears*) Ah! Good! Another woman. I hope she's friendly.

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CHARON: This way, this way. Where's your fee?

PAULINA (*approaching*): I'm looking for someone. I must make sure first that he's here. Please don't be cross. I'm only a slave.

LUCIUS: What! Another! Really, Charon, this is much too bad. Now if I were in charge here, I should take slaves and free men on *alternate* journeys.

PAULINA: I seek a slave, too. He should be here, waiting for me. He was my foster-son, Silas.

SILAS (*struggling to his feet*): What, you, Paulina! What brings you here?

PAULINA (*running to him*): Silas! I could not rest when they took you away. I thought you were suffering—and I wasn't there— (*To CHARON*) It's hard, being a slave, especially when you're growing old. Silas was all I ever had to love.

CHARON (*spreading out his hands*): None of it's my arrangement.

LUCIUS: But he isn't even your own son!

PAULINA: My own son died, I thank the gods for it! Had he lived, he would have been as wretched and tormented as Silas, my poor foster-child.

SILAS: But, Paulina, kind, pitiful old Paulina, how did you come?

PAULINA: I can't quite remember. . . . I'm not as young as I was. They told me you were dying, and that killed my heart, I suppose. I imagined you at the Slaves' Hospital . . . suffering . . . perhaps dead . . . and given no decent burial. I had a few coins I'd kept hidden for years; I escaped, and tramped miles to the

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Hospital—only to find that *you* had escaped too, ill as you were.

SILAS: Yes, Paulina. That place was worse than anything I'd ever known before. I'd always lived in crowded misery, and I wanted to die alone, and in peace. They thought I was too ill to move, but you sometimes get a sudden brief return of strength when you're dying. I ran away—

PAULINA: And I tramped the city all that sultry night, looking for you. A storm broke, and soaked me through. Then, when dawn came, I found you, lying by the roadside. I—I—did what I could, and I remember no more.

SILAS: Oh, Paulina! How good you've always been to me! Except for you, I think I should have ceased to be human. I couldn't have borne my life without you.

PAULINA: Nor I, without you. The gods were kind to let me follow you so quickly. Feel—feel—you must have the fee now. I put it there.

SILAS (*fumbling*): Why, yes. Here it is! And I was so sure I should never have it! Thank you a thousand times, kind foster-mother!

[PAULINA *hands over her fee, and SILAS does the same.*]

CHARON (*ungraciously*): Better late than never. Get in, both of you.

PAULINA: Willingly. Life seems like a bad dream that's over—and I've brought the only thing I ever cared for with me. (*Gets in, helped by SILAS.*)

SILAS (*cheerfully*): Do you know, I have a feeling things are going to be a great deal better for us on the other side?

PAULINA: I have, too. Anyhow, they couldn't be worse.

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SILAS: I am certain that the future will be bright. It will put the miserable past in the shade, for ever. (To APPOLONIUS) Don't you agree with me?

APPOLONIUS: I don't know. You see, my past was magnificent.

PAULINA (*settling up against SILAS, with a sigh of content*): That does make a difference, of course. No more slave-driving . . . no more aches and pains. . . . It's a hard life, when you're old . . . but we've escaped, my Silas.

SILAS: We've escaped, my Paulina, thanks to you.

CHARON (*consulting list*): There's still one more to come.

LUCIUS: You know, Charon, in spite of gross and obvious mismanagement, I do believe I detect a sort of Plan, vague and very bewildering, but still a Plan. And that, you must admit, is a distinct advance from complete chaos. Now the Prime Factor in this Plan appears to be something called Love. I fear I am not expressing myself with my usual fluency, but when you come to consider what I presume you would call a typical boat-load—

CHARON: I would call them more than typically exasperating.

LUCIUS: —the main point emerges, that without love the whole structure of life falls to pieces, and death becomes a joke in the worst possible taste. As it is there's a chance—just a chance, of course—that love works out this Plan with a purpose. Now if I could follow the workings a little further, and obtain some more evidence and information— By Jove! That's an idea. (*Gets up*) I believe I'm going to join the company. I must follow these destinies to a conclusion. I'm interested. I want to see the

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Plan unfolding. It's possible that things aren't the completely disorganised mess one supposed——

*[He is sauntering towards the boat, when another figure approaches.]*

CHARON: Ah! Here he comes. Now, at last we can start. (*To LUCIUS*) And if you don't take your place, you'll regret it.

LUCIUS: My good man, it's useless to adopt a threatening attitude to me. I have a perverse mind. If you start to threaten or persuade I shall do exactly the opposite of what you want. In fact, I shall entirely please myself whether I go or stay. (*Figure approaches the boat*) Ah! the cook.

FABIUS: Here's my fee. Sorry to have kept you waiting. I'm afraid I loitered.

CHARON: It is strictly forbidden to loiter on the banks of the Styx.

LUCIUS: Just like you to say that! My reactions are entirely different. I want to know *why* my old acquaintance Fabius loitered as he did?

FABIUS: Salutations, Lucius Marcellus, named "The Superb".

LUCIUS: Salutations. Now do tell me why you loitered.

FABIUS: I was composing a poem.

LUCIUS: By Bacchus! I thought you were a cook!

FABIUS: Does making a pie prohibit one from making a poem?

LUCIUS: But I never suspected it of you, Fabius—any more than I suspected you of taking your life.

FABIUS: I didn't. That was an accident.

## WATER PARTY

LUCIUS: What! I quite thought you slew yourself because the feast was a failure.

FABIUS: Dear me, no. I don't consider food as important as that. Really, it never interested me.

LUCIUS: Then why—

FABIUS: You see, I was born in slavery. I am the son and grandson of a slave. I've only been a freedman for ten years. You couldn't understand—you, "The Superb"! Being a freedman is rather like being suspended half-way between heaven and hell—you get a whiff of both atmospheres.

LUCIUS: That's a new idea to me. I'd simply never thought of it that way.

FABIUS: Technically, you're a free man. But actually, you retain a slave's mind, to a great extent. As you know, I was educated; I had kept the books; I could read and write. But when freedom came—well, who wanted to read the outpourings of a one-time slave? All the divine fires of poetry burned within me; burned and consumed and wasted me, to no purpose. I was without an audience.

LUCIUS (*with genuine sympathy*): I say! How perfectly ghastly!

FABIUS: So I became a cook. People would eat my pies, though they would not read my poems. And anyhow, as a profession, it is considerably better paid than poetry.

LUCIUS: Well, yes, of course.

FABIUS: And I was still making things. The creative touch, you know.

LUCIUS: Quite so.

FABIUS: Then, unfortunately, I fell in love with the Lady Antonia.

LUCIUS: What! Marcus Silanus' wife?

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FABIUS: Alas, yes.

LUCIUS: But look here, you were poaching on my preserves. The Lady Antonia was the reason I got murdered on the way home.

FABIUS: Oh, no, she wasn't.

LUCIUS: She *wasn't*? Blast! Another illusion gone.

FABIUS: I regret to say, you were murdered entirely by mistake. I fear that the Lady Antonia has many lovers.

LUCIUS (*exploding and ramping up and down*): Murdered by mistake! Oh! This is too much! And I was just thinking I'd found a Plan! Ten thousand infernal deities! Everything's as big a mess as I always said it was!

FABIUS: Marcus Silanus sent two assassins to waylay and murder the General, lately returned from some place with the hues of a climate—Britain he called it, a regular outpost of Empire, I remember. Well, the Lady Antonia—like so many women—simply lost her head over the returned hero. Soldiers always have an unfair advantage over civilians. It's glamour, that's what it is. There's no glamour about cooking.

LUCIUS (*still seething*): Murdered by mistake! Of all the disgracefully inept proceedings. Is there no vestige of organisation anywhere?

CHARON (*with a sudden gleam of inspiration, pointing the oar at him*): I see it all! It is a mistake! You've got no business here! You oughtn't to be here. You ought to be somewhere else!

LUCIUS: Of course I ought! I'll go back at once! Oh, confound it, they've cremated me by this time! But I don't like it down here! I won't stay down here! Murdered by mistake! Oh, blast everything. What shall I do?



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FABIUS: Well, sir, *I* didn't in the least want to join this contingent, either. Give me life every time, say I—even if you do have to get your living by cooking and no one reads your poetry, and then you break your heart over a worthless woman into the bargain. But there, I don't believe *you* have ever really loved.

LUCIUS: Oh, yes, I have. I've loved—and loved—and loved—I've forgotten how many.

FABIUS: Exactly. Quantity, not quality. *One* woman you really loved with all your heart would have taught you more than all the rest put together.

LUCIUS: Do you think so? Did you love the Lady Antonia like that?

FABIUS: I did.

LUCIUS: But that was confoundedly silly of you. You've said yourself she was worthless. *I* can tell you she was faithless.

FABIUS: True. But I loved her. Real love transcends *what* it loves. You don't understand. You aren't a poet.

LUCIUS: You warned us that *you* were in a transcendental mood—otherwise composing a poem!

FABIUS: I composed one yesterday to the Lady Antonia, but I dared not give it to her. How could I? I was only her husband's cook. But I hid it in a dish of pastries. I thought she might see it, and imagine perhaps that some gallant at the feast had composed it in her honour, and not be altogether displeased. I climbed the arbutus tree by the window, to watch whether she would find it and how she would look when she read it.

LUCIUS: And did you see her take it?

FABIUS: No. The gods, in their inscrutable

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wisdom, denied me even that. It's well known that they are jealous of the poets, and do all they can to break their hearts.

LUCIUS: Did the branch snap?

FABIUS: Not even that. I just felt giddy, lost my grip, and fell. I used to write my poems at night—anyhow, I couldn't sleep; and that day I couldn't eat—so you see— (*Spreads out his hands.*)

LUCIUS: But what an utterly futile end!

FABIUS: They carried me into the house to die. You and most of the guests went, after my disturbing crash. Marcus Silanus himself came to see me . . . and before I lost consciousness completely a messenger came running in to say you had been murdered.

LUCIUS: And what did Marcus Silanus say?

FABIUS: He'd been drinking pretty deeply by that time. He brought his fist down on the table with an oath and said, "Those imbeciles have picked the wrong man! I'll have them up in the courts for this. Get me a couple more who know their business, *and* the General."

LUCIUS: And what did the Lady Antonia say to that?

FABIUS: She wasn't there then. My last glimpse of her was when I saw her lovely arm go out to the dish where my poor poem lay hidden. I felt a sudden wildness in my heart—and then I fell. (*Having concluded his story, he draws his garments more closely about him and speaks to CHARON with an air of finality*) Your fee, Ferryman. (*He hands the coin to CHARON, and gets quietly into the boat.*)

LUCIUS (*who has been sitting thinking for a few moments, suddenly springs up*): Stop! Stop! I want to hear some more. Do you still love the

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wretched Antonia, worthless as she is? Are you still going to write poems? Are you going to write any more about *her*?

FABIUS (*quietly*): I have that within me which cannot die.

LUCIUS: But have you any use for this rotten scheme of things, when we're just left to muddle through, and then come to a futile end. Look at it! I, murdered by mistake! You slip off an arbutus tree! Why, why, why?

FABIUS: I don't know. Perhaps that new sect of people called Christians aren't as ignorant as we think. I once heard one of them quoting, "He that loveth not, knoweth not God."

JULIA (*softly*): I understand.

PAULINA: I, too, Lady Julia. That's something that even a slave can grasp.

FABIUS: It's—what makes it worth while to go on.

LUCIUS: Then there is a Plan! Fabius—Julia—Paulina—you've all got something that I've missed. Yes, even you, poor old Paulina, ignorant and unlettered as you are. You can't read or write but your fingers are on the secret that eludes me still.

CHARON: Time's up. (*He unloosens the mooring chain, and throws it on the bank, where it falls with a clank. He seizes his oar, and prepares to push off*) Jove himself would have his work cut out to deal with you.

LUCIUS (*taking a sudden decision*): Well, I may lack the one thing needful. But I've got something else that's nearly as strong. Hi! Charon! Stop the boat! I must find out what happens to everybody! I'm an *author*!

[*He takes a leap into the boat, and struggles*

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*into his seat as the curtain falls. When it is raised again, the shadowy boat and its occupants have disappeared. Only a small light, glowing in the distance, shows that CHARON has reached the Other Side.]*

## CURTAIN



# LIVES O' MEN

## A Play of the Coal Mines

by  
JOE CORRIE

This play was originally written in Scottish dialect, but the present English version should have a wide appeal, as the dialogue can be adapted to the locality.

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*All applications regarding performances of this play must be made to the author's agents, Messrs. J. B. Pinker & Son, Talbot House, Arundel Street, London, W.C.2.*

## CHARACTERS

JOHN HARWOOD, *a blinded miner*

JESSIE HARWOOD, *his wife*

JIM HARWOOD, *their son*

MRS. BROWN, *a neighbour*

BILL MARTIN, *a friend of John's*

MRS. MORGAN, *John's sister*

## LIVES O' MEN

SCENE: *The living-room of the Harwood home in a mining village. It is simply furnished. The door leading to the passage and outside is in the centre of the back wall. The door to the other rooms is at the back of the right wall (spectator's). The table is set for a simple meal for one. Some of JIM'S pit-clothes are near the fire.*

*The curtain rises on an empty stage.*

*There is a slight pause, during which we hear the engines of a coal pit throbbing steadily. Then MRS. BROWN passes the window and enters, after knocking. She carries a newspaper in her hand.*

MRS. BROWN: Anybody at home? (MRS. HARWOOD enters from room) Is John in, Mrs. Harwood?

MRS. HARWOOD: Yes, but he's lying down just now, Mrs. Brown. What d'ye want with him?

MRS. BROWN: Just to let him hear a bit that's in this newspaper about a man who has got his sight back after twenty years' blindness.

MRS. HARWOOD: Don't let him hear about it just now, Mrs. Brown; he's in one of his lonely moods.

MRS. BROWN: Well, I'll just leave the paper with ye, Mrs. Harwood, and you can read it out to him yourself when he's feeling better. (MRS. BROWN gives MRS. HARWOOD the paper and goes towards door, but she turns. This is a habit MRS. BROWN has—always seeming to go out



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*but turning at the door and coming back)* The men are gathering for a meeting up at the pit, I see.

MRS. HARWOOD: What's the matter now?

MRS. BROWN: God knows. Thinking about having a strike, perhaps, to make the masters plant primroses on the pithead. Ha!

*[This is another habit of MRS. BROWN'S—uttering a little high-pitched "Ha!" when she thinks she has been funny.]*

MRS. HARWOOD: We don't want another strike just now, Mrs. Brown. We've had enough o' them in the past.

MRS. BROWN: I told that husband o' mine before he went out to the pit just now that if he voted for a strike I'd sever his head from his body with one blow.

MRS. HARWOOD: Is he away to the pit already?

MRS. BROWN: Yes. He's what one would call a red revolutionary. Would take his *bed* to the pit with him if he got permission. First man on the pithead every day, and the last man home. How he must love it. Ha!

MRS. HARWOOD: Our Jim isn't in from the football field yet, and he has his cup o' tea to get and change into his pit clothes. He'll have to be hurrying home.

MRS. BROWN: I heard that Jim might get the chance to sign on for one o' the big football teams.

MRS. HARWOOD: Yes, there was some talk about that last month. But nothing has ever come of it.

MRS. BROWN: That would please his father, Mrs. Harwood.

MRS. HARWOOD: It would, Mrs. Brown. . . . I

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thought he would have been beginning to get over it after a year, but he still has spells of depression.

MRS. BROWN: Oh, but that's only natural, Mrs. Harwood. It's a terrible thing to lose the sight of the eyes, especially at John's age. The poor man must be lost completely.

MRS. HARWOOD: The throbbing of them engines are the worst on him; he's letting them get the better of him, for a pity.

MRS. BROWN: I can understand it, Mrs. Harwood. Now that he can't see he'll be hearing things he never heard before. It's a great pity altogether.

MRS. HARWOOD: I have the feeling that something could be done for him if we could only afford to have a specialist.

MRS. BROWN: I'm sure there could, Mrs. Harwood. . . . No word of him getting any compensation yet?

MRS. HARWOOD: No, and I'm afraid he'll never get any, Mrs. Brown. You see, it was his own fault going back to the miss-fired shot before the time stated in the Act. No, the only thing is applying to the authorities for help, and he won't have that—he says it is charity.

MRS. BROWN: Yes, he was always the proud one, was John. But he should think of you, Mrs. Harwood, and the struggle ye have with only Jim's wage coming into the house.

MRS. HARWOOD: I don't grumble, Mrs. Brown. I'd rather struggle and have John happy, than get money from the authorities and him unhappy.

MRS. BROWN: Yes, you're quite right, Mrs. Harwood, for the poor man has enough sorrow without having any more. (*She goes to the door*)

## LIVES O' MEN

but returns) D'you know, I could enjoy a cup of tea now if I had a piece of cheese. D'ye ever take a tremendous liking for something which ye don't have?

MRS. HARWOOD: No, I can't say I do.

MRS. BROWN: That's one of my great failings—always wishing for this and that when I don't have the slightest chance of getting it. At the present moment I think I could die for a piece of cheese.

MRS. HARWOOD: Perhaps I could spare you a bit, Mrs. Brown. Jim isn't too fond of it and John . . .

MRS. BROWN: Now, Mrs. Harwood, I hope you don't think I was hinting.

MRS. HARWOOD (*going to the cupboard*): Not at all.

MRS. BROWN: For if there's one thing I hate on the face of this earth it is borrowing.

MRS. HARWOOD: It'll be a week old now, Mrs. Brown, but I don't see any mould on it. (*She wraps it in a piece of paper.*)

MRS. BROWN: Even if there was, Mrs. Harwood, it would be more than welcome. I don't mind a bit o' blue; I can always kid myself on that it's gorgonzola. Ha! (*She takes the piece of cheese from Mrs. Harwood*) Thank ye, very much. Now, I'll go and have it. I'll have to send the kids out on a fool's errand to eat it in peace. (*Goes to door and returns*) Oh, I came in to see if ye could lend me a pencil, Mrs. Harwood. This is the afternoon I put everything aside to fill in my football pools. (*Mrs. Harwood looks on the mantelshelf*) One, two, ex till I'm cross-eyed; and it's only a tanner thrown down the sink, for I'm never within a mile of it. But what would we do without our little bit of hope, Mrs.

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HARWOOD? Hope springs eternal in the human breast. Ha!

MRS. HARWOOD: Here ye are, Mrs. Brown; it's just a stump, but it'll do your job.

[MRS. BROWN *spits on it.*]

MRS. BROWN: For luck. Wouldn't it be grand if I could just win about twenty thousand pounds? D'ye know the first thing I'd do?

MRS. HARWOOD: I've no idea.

MRS. BROWN: I'd have such a tightener of fish and chips that I'd sleep for a week. Ha!

[*Again she goes to the door just as JIM enters in a hurry. He is perspiring and carries a pair of football boots which he flings in a corner. This is an excuse for MRS. BROWN to return to the family circle.*]

MRS. HARWOOD: You haven't left yourself with much time, Jim?

JIM: It's all right, Mother; I've loads of time.

[*Strips off his coat and vest and wipes the perspiration from his forehead.*]

MRS. BROWN: My husband's away to the pit half an hour ago.

JIM: Yes, but your husband is glad to get out to the pit. If I was married to you I'd *stay* at the pit.

MRS. BROWN: Ye know what happened to ye yesterday when ye started giving me cheek? I kissed ye, didn't I?

JIM: Ye did.

MRS. BROWN: Well, behave yourself or you'll get the same dose again.

JIM: Dose is the right word, Mrs. Brown. . . . How's Sally?

MRS. BROWN: She's all right. Why?

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JIM: Wouldn't mind giving *her* cheek.

MRS. BROWN: That girl's going to be my death yet. (JIM *sits at the table and* MRS. HARWOOD *pours out his tea. MRS. BROWN has put the cheese on the table, and JIM has taken it from the paper unseen by MRS. BROWN. He begins eating it. MRS. BROWN doesn't stop in her story*) Came home last night she did at one o'clock this morning. . . . Yes, everyone in bed fast asleep. And what does she do but knock up the fire to make herself a cup o' tea. So I wakes up. "Here!" says I. "What d'ye think you're doing?" She looks at me with a superior look on her face and says, "What the hell's your business?" So I jumped out of bed and gave her such a wallop on the jaw that she went off to her bed yelling holy murder. Ha! Where the young ones get their bad manners and sauce from beats me.

JIM: They get it from their mothers, if ye ask me.

MRS. BROWN: Yes, but there's nobody *asking* you. However, she'll know better the next time, I hope. (*She looks for her cheese*) Where did I put my cheese?

JIM: Cheese! Was that your cheese that was in the paper?

MRS. BROWN: Yes.

JIM: Huh! It's gone. How was I to know it was *your* cheese?

MRS. BROWN: What! D'ye mean to say you've eaten it?

JIM: Well, it was on the table for eating, wasn't it?

MRS. BROWN (*to* MRS. HARWOOD): In the name o' God, eaten in front of my very eyes.

JIM: If you'd gossip less and mind your own business more . . .

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[MRS. BROWN *pulls the chair back and JIM falls on the floor.*]

MRS. BROWN (*getting a hold of him as he rises*): And to pile on the agony I'm going to kiss ye, see.

[*She is kissing JIMMY when JOHN enters from the room. JOHN is a typical miner of 50 years, strong, broad-shouldered, but helplessly blind. He gropes his way and just stands inside the door. He wears green spectacles.*]

JOHN: Is this you up to some more o' your tricks, Mrs. Brown?

MRS. BROWN: Just kissing him again, John, for his sauce.

JOHN: Ha! ha! you're a terrible woman. If you're not up to one thing you're up to another.

[*JOHN gropes his way, and MRS. HARWOOD helps him to his favourite seat at the fire.*

*JIM gulps his tea and hurries off to the room.*]

MRS. BROWN: I like to have a bit o' fun now and again, John. What's the good o' grouching?

JOHN: You're quite right, Mrs. Brown. There are too many grouchers in the world, if ye ask me.

MRS. BROWN: That's right, John, and many who grouse have no cause to grouse, either. I can't stick them kind. Eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die, that's my policy. Ha!

JOHN: Yes, and I believe it's the best in the long run.

MRS. BROWN: How're ye keeping?

JOHN: Oh, all right.

MRS. BROWN: Any glimpse of anything yet?

JOHN: Oh, no, I'm afraid that's all over now, Mrs. Brown.

MRS. BROWN: You mustn't lose heart, you know.

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JOHN: I try not to, but at times I just can't help myself.

MRS. BROWN: I know, John, it isn't easy for the likes o' you. But one o' these days you'll be giving us a big surprise, mind I'm saying it.

JOHN: Well, we've got to hope so, Mrs. Brown.

MRS. BROWN: There's nothing like hope, John. God, if it wasn't for hope and the football pools half of us would be as well to lie down and die. But I'll have to be going and seeing what the children are doing. (*Going*) And me had my hopes built up on having that bit o' cheese in peace. Let's ye see. We can depend on nothing these days, nothing. (*She is now in the passage*) That's them gathering together for the meeting. Dick Stanton up on the beer box, a man who hasn't worked for years, but he'll be advocating a strike. The things we see in this life to make us laugh. Ha!

[MRS. BROWN goes off.]

JOHN: Now, that's a woman that I admire. Eight children to feed and clothe and only the wage of one man coming in. And ye never hear her grouching, never. (*JIM enters wearing trousers but no shirt*) What's your news, Jim?

JIM: You'll never guess, Father.

JOHN: What is it?

JIM: Chelsea (*pulling shirt over his head*)

JOHN (*in surprise*): What?

JIM: Chelsea: Ted Morton was telling me this afternoon that the Chelsea manager has a mind to sign me on.

JOHN: Good!

JIM: Yes, and I wouldn't be surprised if it happens this week. He was watching me last Satur-

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day in the cup-tie and said to someone whom Ted knows that I looked a likely chap.

JOHN: By gum, Jim, if you should get signed on there you're made!

JIM: Well, it's almost certain, Father, according to Ted.

MRS. HARWOOD: Don't build up any hopes of that, Jim. How often have we heard of other lads going away, but have never gone at the finish. It's time ye were hurrying, Jim.

[JIM goes towards room.]

JIM: Yes, down a pit on a day like this. By gum, if I'm not fed up with it!

[JIM goes off to the room.]

JOHN: Jim's heart is set on the football. I wish he would strike it lucky with Chelsea.

MRS. HARWOOD: And what would that mean to us, John? He would go away and in a month or two forget about us altogether.

JOHN: Ye haven't much faith in the lad, surely?

MRS. HARWOOD: Well, take Bob Wilton, and take Sam Mercer. Did they think about their folk when they went off? Within six months they were both married and their folk didn't benefit a single penny from their prosperity.

JOHN (*getting angry*): Why must ye always see the worst side of things?

MRS. HARWOOD: I don't; I'm just stating what happened.

JOHN: And would you have him stick in the pit when he might be out of them?

MRS. HARWOOD: I wouldn't, but you know how much we're depending on him.

JOHN (*bitterly*): Yes, and it's all my fault. <sup>Well</sup> for a damned fool I was! . . . Listen to these e' out in a



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... Throb!—throb!—throb! . . . beating against my very brain.

MRS. HARWOOD: The doctor told you the last day he was here, John, that you've to get them engines out of your mind.

JOHN: Yes, it's easy for the doctor talking, but the doctor has his eyesight. I'm blind!—blind! (*Quieter*) I was a fool, a damned fool. And I knew better, too, but—trusted to luck and—Oh!

MRS. HARWOOD: What's past is past and regretting won't do any good, John. You'd be far better to look forward to the day when you might see again.

JOHN: If I just saw a glimmer of hope! But everything is as black as midnight. . . . My eyesight! The one thing in life that I valued the most. . . . Throb! throb! throb! night and day, day and night. It's going to drive me mad.

[JIM returns in pit shirt and trousers to put on his boots, which are at fireplace.]

JIM: I see there's a meeting taking place at the pit gates.

JOHN: Yes, what's the matter, Jim?

JIM: Oh, the company won't do anything in that section of ours to give us better air. We were all going about reeling last night with heads like to split.

JOHN: Yes, and they wonder when explosions happen.

JIM: I could bet there was enough gas in our place last night to blow the whole pit up in the air.

JOHN: Of course the men are damned fools  
JIM: <sup>king</sup> in it.

pens tHARWOOD: It's easy saying that, John, but

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when men are depending on the pit for their living they've got to do many a thing they don't want to.

JOHN: Yes, I know. It's the bread and butter that makes us take the risks we do. (*To JIM*) If ever you get the chance to get out, Jim, take it with both hands and never think of us.

JIM: If I get to Chelsea, Father, it's you I'll be thinking o' first, don't forget that.

JOHN: That's nice o' ye, Jim, but . . . There's a feeling o' something in the atmosphere to-day I don't like.

JIM: It's just the day, Father. It's glorious sunshine and the birds are beginning to sing loudly now.

JOHN: Glorious sunshine. What would I not give just to see the sky again. . . . But I'm grumbling too much; I'm being a blasted nuisance to everybody. (*JIM puts on his coat*) Don't you go down that pit to-day, Jim, if things are no better.

JIM: I won't, Father.

MRS. HARWOOD: Why put that in his head, John? If the men go down and Jim doesn't, ye know that it will mean him losing his job.

JOHN: Surely better to lose a job than lose his life.

MRS. HARWOOD (*to JIM*): Very well; do what ye like, Jim.

JOHN: *I* took a risk and see what happened to *me*—a burden on everybody.

MRS. HARWOOD: Now, now, John, ye must get it out of your head that you're a burden. I'm <sup>Mr.</sup> sure we never complain.

JIM: Of course we don't. And if I get <sup>much</sup> for on by Chelsea, Father, I'll get a specialis <sup>but in a</sup>

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about your eyes the first thing. (*JIM is ready to go to the pit*) And if I get on well I'll look for a place in the country somewhere so that you can have peace from these engines. Cheerio!

JOHN: Cheerio, Jim!

[*JIM goes out.*]

JOHN: Give me down my pipe, Jessie. (*She hands him his pipe from the mantelshelf. He puts it in his mouth and she lights a match for him. He puffs*) I wish Jim wasn't going to that pit to-day somehow.

MRS. HARWOOD: Why?

JOHN: I can't tell; just a feeling. . . . Perhaps it's just the day, as Jim said. . . . It would be fine if he could get us away from here, Jessie. I'd be the happy man that day.

MRS. HARWOOD: You'd be away from all your friends, John.

JOHN: Yes, and I'd be away from them blasted engines and noises too. But I'm afraid it's too good to be true.

[*Knock is heard on door. MRS. HARWOOD goes to answer.*]

MRS. HARWOOD (*speaking in to JOHN*): It's Bill Martin, John.

JOHN: Come in, Bill, come in!

[*BILL enters. He is a man of JOHN's own age, a miner, too, but on the dole.*]

BILL (*entering*): I thought perhaps you'd like to go out a bit to-day, John. It's grand outside.

JOHN: Thank ye, Bill. But sit down a minute till I get my smoke.

J<sup>n</sup> HARWOOD: I'll take a run down to the pens t<sup>h</sup> John, while Bill's here.

All right, Jessie.

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[MRS. HARWOOD *pulls a shawl over her shoulder.*]

MRS. HARWOOD (*to BILL*): I suppose there's a meeting at the pit gates.

BILL: It's over, John, and the men are going down.

JOHN: Damned fools they are. But they'll go down once too often.

MRS. HARWOOD (*lifting a message basket*): I won't be long, John.

JOHN: There's no hurry.

[MRS. HARWOOD *goes out.*]

BILL (*sitting*): How're ye feeling to-day, John?

JOHN: Oh, all right, Bill, but damned discontented. I can't get over this being attended to hand and foot. Can't help feeling that I'm in the way.

BILL: That's a mistake, John. I'm sure the missus doesn't mind.

JOHN: I know she doesn't, but she's getting tired, Bill; I can hear it in her voice.

BILL: What about the compensation?

JOHN: Oh, that's a wash-out.

BILL: And have ye applied for relief at the town hall yet?

JOHN: It'll never be said that John Harwood accepted public money. I've been independent all my days and I'm staying independent.

BILL: And d'ye think it's fair to put your pride before the struggle of the missus?

JOHN: Eh?

BILL: There's only Jim's wage coming into the house, John, and that won't go far. af.

JOHN: And how d'ye think I could bear such for with public money coming into the hall out in a

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BILL: There's no disgrace in it as far as I can see. There are many in this place a damned sight better off than you are and getting relief.

JOHN: Yes, but I'm different.

BILL: Oh, well, I suppose you know best, John. But I'm damned sure I wouldn't have my wife suffer privations because of *my* pride.

JOHN: Bill, you're insulting me!

BILL: Maybe I am, but I'm giving you my honest opinion.

JOHN: My God, don't ye think I'm suffering enough these days?

BILL: There's nobody has more sympathy for ye than I have, John. But I think you should play fair with the missus. All ye have to do is make an application and you'll get quite a few shillings a week. And who is there in this town that would grudge it to you?

JOHN: Bill, you know that when I was fit and well and able to do my day's work, there was no one more against public spongers than I was.

BILL: But, good Lord, *you're* not a sponger. When a man loses his sight he loses his all. Haven't you paid rates to keep others in the past?

JOHN: I know I have; but the very thought of getting money from that town hall makes me feel sick.

BILL: Yes, but the fact of *not* getting money from the town hall may be making the missus feel *more* sick. Look here. Why not come down with me now to have a talk with the town clerk?

JIM: <sup>J</sup>Don't ask me to do that, man; you have pens <sup>and</sup> a how the very thought of it cuts into <sup>my</sup> heart.

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BILL: I understand how ye feel, John; I do, really. But what we'll do is explain everything to him, and ask his advice. There's no harm in that, is there?

JOHN: All right, I'll go. I believe I *have* been selfish. But if he says one word against me, as sure as there's a God in heaven I'll . . .

BILL: Now, now, John, that'll do . . . Where's your cap?

JOHN: It'll be on the nail in the door there.

[BILL goes and gets the cap and puts it on his head. JOHN rises.]

JOHN: Listen to them—these bloody engines! Throb!—throb!—throb! . . . (*Madly*) Oh, that something would happen to them to blow them in the air!

BILL: John! What are ye saying, man!

JOHN (*madly*): Blow them in the air!

BILL (*madly, too*): Look here, if ye say that again, blind and all as ye are I'll strike ye!

JOHN (*pathetically*): Bill! . . . Bill! . . . Don't say that. . . . Oh, I'm tired of it all . . . tired . . . tired.

BILL: I'm sorry, John; I didn't mean it. But I'm thinking of the chaps that are underground.

JOHN: Let's get out, Bill . . . I'm beginning to lose a hold o' myself. . . . Throb!—throb!—throb!

[BILL takes JOHN by the arm and leads him out.

*There is a pause, during which the engines can be heard puffing.*

MRS. HARWOOD returns with her groceries<sup>set</sup>  
She is accompanied by MRS. BROWN.]

MRS. BROWN (*entering*): Well, as I was such for Mrs. Harwood, the less you say to pan out in a



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MRS. HARWOOD: Oh, what happened?

MRS. BROWN: Nothing much. I just happened to be in and remarked that the cat was licking the frying-pan under the bed, and that she'd be better if she kept it somewhere out of the cat's way. So she flew at me like a tiger and told me to mind my own business.

MRS. HARWOOD: I don't know why you go in about her at all, Mrs. Brown.

MRS. BROWN: Neither do I, to tell ye the truth—just habit, I think. (MRS. MORGAN *passes the window*) Oh, here she comes. Cut her off the first chance, Mrs. Harwood. And don't offer her tea whatever ye do or you'll never get rid of her.

[MRS. MORGAN *knocks on the door lightly and enters. She is quite well dressed and proud.*]

MRS. MORGAN (to MRS. BROWN): Good afternoon.

[*It is quite evident that she doesn't approve of MRS. BROWN being in this particular house.*]

MRS. BROWN (*quite politely, too*): Good afternoon.

MRS. MORGAN (to MRS. HARWOOD): You don't tell me that you have let John go out on a bright, sunny afternoon like this?

MRS. HARWOOD: Yes, he's gone out for a walk with Bill.

MRS. MORGAN: And have you no more sense in your head, Jessie?

MRS. HARWOOD: The doctor says he can get out as much as he cares, out into the fresh air.

MRS. MORGAN: Well, it doesn't say much for the sense of the doctor. A blind man out in a



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strong sun like that! I never heard of such folly.

MRS. BROWN: The doctor should know best.

MRS. MORGAN: I beg your pardon, Mrs. Brown, but I was speaking to Mrs. Harwood.

MRS. BROWN: So sorry!

MRS. MORGAN: Of course, John brought it all on himself. How a man of his experience should make such a mistake is still beyond my comprehension.

MRS. HARWOOD: Must we keep hearing that for evermore?

MRS. MORGAN: Our Tom says . . .

MRS. HARWOOD: I've heard what your Tom says till I'm sick to death hearing it.

MRS. MORGAN: Is there any need to be nasty?

MRS. HARWOOD: There is! We all know that John made a mistake, but thousands of others have made mistakes and haven't had the bad luck that he had. And if your Tom had to rush as much in the pit to make a wage he might make mistakes, too. But Tom has always been a gaffer's man and has never done a good honest day's work in his life.

MRS. BROWN: That's the stuff to give 'em!

MRS. MORGAN: My Tom has been in the pit for twenty years and has never got a scratch. Of course, he knows his work and the dangers of it, and is careful.

MRS. HARWOOD: Well, we'll let it rest at that, Mrs. Morgan.

*[She pours out a cup of tea for Mrs. BROWN. MRS. MORGAN looks annoyed because there has been no cup put out for her.]*

MRS. MORGAN: I suppose they were threatening a strike this afternoon again?

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MRS. HARWOOD: Yes, and the more strikes the more safety, if you ask me.

*[She pours out tea for herself.]*

MRS. MORGAN: And how would you manage if there was a strike now?

MRS. HARWOOD: That would be *my* affair, Mrs. Morgan.

MRS. BROWN: I wonder if it would, Mrs. Harwood?

MRS. MORGAN: The half of them don't want to work, anyway. My Tom says that there isn't enough gas in that section as would kill a canary.

MRS. BROWN: Your Tom doesn't work in that particular section, Mrs. Morgan.

MRS. MORGAN: When a man knows his work he can get working in the best places.

MRS. BROWN: Yes, so would my Daniel too if he was prepared to kiss the gaffer's foot.

MRS. MORGAN: Look here, Mrs. Brown, I didn't come in here to be insulted.

MRS. BROWN: No, ye came in here to insult poor Mrs. Harwood. Haven't ye enough sympathy in your hard heart to know that she's nearly off her head with trouble. What she wants now is some encouragement and help to carry on, not a lot of silly condemnation and carping such as you come in with.

MRS. MORGAN: Oh, but if I'm not wanted in here I certainly won't come in. (*To MRS. HARWOOD*) I'm going down to the Co-op to lift my dividend. Are ye coming?

MRS. HARWOOD: I have no dividend to lift.

MRS. MORGAN: Why not?

MRS. HARWOOD: It was all lifted during John's illness.

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MRS. MORGAN: I thought as much. Of course you would give him his fruit and invalid wines.

MRS. HARWOOD: He needed it and he got it, and I was very thankful that I had dividend lying at the Co-op to give him these things.

MRS. MORGAN: Well, I suppose you should know your own business best.

MRS. BROWN (*to* MRS. HARWOOD): Looks like it, doesn't it.

[MRS. MORGAN *goes towards the door.*]

MRS. MORGAN (*proudly*): I'm going to select a new suite for my bedroom—walnut—and the best they have in the shop. (*She looks off outside and becomes interested in what she sees*) What in the name o' God has been happening to John? Look! There's a crowd round him.

[MRS. HARWOOD *and* MRS. BROWN *hurry to the passage to look out.* MRS. HARWOOD *rushes outside.*]

MRS. MORGAN: I know what's happened. . . . The sun is too strong for the poor man. . . . She has no earthly idea of how to look after him, no earthly idea.

MRS. BROWN: Oh, for God's sake shut up; you're beginning to get on my nerves. Get to hell out o' here and mind your own business!

[JOHN *enters, led by* BILL *and followed by* MRS. HARWOOD. *He is holding his head and staggers in a dazed way.*]

BILL: Now, you're all right now, John. Just sit down and rest yourself.

[JOHN *is seated by* BILL.]

MRS. BROWN: What happened, Bill?

BILL: Oh, nothing much.

MRS. MORGAN (*angrily*): He had no right to be out in that sun!

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BILL: What are you talking about?

MRS. MORGAN: I tell ye . . .

BILL (*interrupting*): And I don't want to hear ye. The sun had nothing to do with it.

MRS. MORGAN: Then what happened?

BILL: It's none o' your business.

MRS. MORGAN: Thank ye, very much.

[*She goes out very angry.*]

BILL (*to JOHN*): I'm sure everything went all right, John; there was no need for ye to lose your head like that.

JOHN: Everything wasn't all right. I've signed my name to accept charity, to become a burden on the ratepayers, and it's blood money that I'll get—blood money.

BILL: You're all wrong, John, looking at it in the wrong way. (*To MRS. BROWN*) What d'you think, Mrs. Brown? Is there anything for him to be ashamed of in accepting relief?

MRS. BROWN: Of course there isn't. By gum, if there's one man in this place that deserves it that man is John Harwood.

MRS. HARWOOD: If it's going to upset ye, John, ye needn't accept it. I'll manage somehow.

JOHN: I'm damned selfish, Jessie, I know, but . . . it hurts. Ye see I've always been strong and willing and could never suffer the kind that were looking for relief on every occasion. And I said some strong things against them. But now . . . the shoe is on the other foot.

BILL: What you want to do, John, is forget all about what ye used to think and keep your mind easy *now*. If Jim signs on for Chelsea, well, your troubles may be all over in a flash.

JOHN: If only that would happen, Bill. I don't

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mind accepting from my own, but it hurts to think that I should accept from others.

BILL: And who's likely to complain?

MRS. BROWN: Nobody. John Harwood has been looked upon in this place as a decent hard-working man, and they all know that his accident might have happened to any man in that pit.

BILL: That's right, Mrs. Brown, he has no cause at all to be sour about it.

MRS. HARWOOD: Will I make ye a cup o' tea, John?

JOHN: No, Jessie, I'm alright. Thanks for what ye have done, Bill.

BILL: I need no thanks, John, I'm only too glad to know that I've been able to do something for ye at last.

JOHN: Listen! . . . Throb! . . . throb! . . . *(laughing a bit hysterically)* Listen to them—mocking me—laughing at me. Ha! ha!—gave my all to the company and their engines just mock me and jeer at me.

MRS. HARWOOD *(piteously)*: John, why don't ye try to get that out of your head.

JOHN: Because I can't get it out of my head. I tell ye they keep hammering on my brain! They're going to drive me mad!

BILL: You're making it difficult for folk, John.

JOHN *(angry)*: Can I help it! . . . Can I stop them from going? . . . Can I refuse to listen to them when . . . *(He stops suddenly and we realise that the engines have stopped)* Listen! *(There is now a deathly stillness)* They're stopped. *(The others look at each other bewildered. BILL goes to the window and looks out towards the pit)* Why should they stop? . . . What has happened? *(BILL has suddenly become stiff)* Bill, what is it?

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*[The two women have unconsciously clung to each other. JOHN rises and holds on to the arms of the chair.]*

BILL: Oh, merciful Christ!

*[He hurries outside. MRS. BROWN runs to the window.]*

MRS. BROWN: Something has happened. . . . I see people running up to the pit. . . . Oh, Sam! —Sam! . . . (MRS. HARWOOD goes to her side) Look! . . . Look! . . . It's a disaster. . . .

*[She runs out hysterically. MRS. HARWOOD hurries to JOHN and clutches him.]*

MRS. HARWOOD: John!—John!—Jim, my boy!

*[JOHN holds on to her.]*

JOHN: Take me out, Jessie . . . Surely to God I can do something. . . . Take me out! . . . (shouting) Jim! Jim! (Men and women are now hurrying past the window to the pit. Ambulance bells are heard) It'll be that gas—that bloody gas!

MRS. HARWOOD: Oh, my boy . . . my boy!

*[She leaves JOHN's side and hurries out. Ambulance bells are heard again. More and more people pass.]*

JOHN: Jessie! . . . Jessie! . . . take me out! (He gropes for her then realises that she has gone) Speak somebody! . . . For the love o' God speak! (Ambulance bells are now heard louder, and the crowds are heard speaking and shouting) (so helpless) Oh, merciful God, spare my boy . . . spare my Jim! . . . Start these engines! . . . (hysterically) Start these engines! . . . (madly, as he gropes his way towards the door) Start—these—engines!

*[He stumbles against a chair and falls on the floor. And lying there he sobs bitterly,*

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*utterly helpless. Ambulance bells keep ringing, people keep shouting. Then we hear the boom of a distant explosion. There is a slight pause, the only thing heard being JOHN'S sobbing. And the curtain falls slowly.]*

## CURTAIN

# GOD'S JAILER

by

GEOFFREY THOMAS

This play was first produced by the Players' Theatre, Covent Garden, with Ernest Milton in the leading role.

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*All applications regarding performances of this play must be made to the author's agents, The London Play Company, 51 Piccadilly, London, W.1.*



## CHARACTERS

SATAN

NERVOUS, *his secretary*

LAZY

MISERY

HOPELESS,

} *his ambassadors*

GABRIEL

## GOD'S JAILER

SCENE: *The Devil's Council Chamber.*

*It is a bare, untidy room, devoid of any ornament. There are three doors, besides an entrance at centre back. At this entrance stands a notice board, with arrow pointing upwards, thus:—*

*This way up  
to the Earth.*

*Beyond the entrance can be seen a dull red glow coming from the infernal regions outside.*

*On one of the doors there hangs a notice "SEKRETAIRY" (sic) and on another the word—GAOL, with the G struck out and J placed above it.*

*There is a hole in the ceiling through which the luggage of people arriving from the Earth is lowered.*

*A small kitchen table, with a handbell on it, stands in the centre of the stage, and there are a number of kitchen chairs. To the left of the table is a divan on which SATAN is reclining. He is eating an apple. There is a dish of apples on a small table within his reach, and on the floor beside him stands a small wooden box filled with medals. These medals consist merely of circular discs of tin, about two inches in diameter, with a piece of string and a safety pin attached to each.*

*SATAN is dressed in a long scarlet robe, with the head-dress of an ancient Egyptian.*

*Above his head is suspended a swing*

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*punkah, which is in a very dilapidated condition. SATAN has taken the scarlet cord from round his waist and has attached it to the punkah as pull-rope. When the curtain rises SATAN is alone on the stage. He is reclining on his divan eating an apple. Through the entrance there comes the rumbling of the voices of a large crowd outside. SATAN puts down his apple and fans his face with his hand. He gives two or three pulls at the punkah rope, but the effort makes him hotter than ever.*

SATAN: When will they learn to regulate this heat? (*He glances with irritation towards the entrance, and getting up from his divan he shuffles over to the table and rings the hand-bell. He returns to his position on the divan, pulls the punkah again, and then looks up at it with disgust . . .*) Ach! The whole contraption's antiquated! (*He stands up on the divan and unties the cord*) Antiquated and ineffective! (*He ties the cord round his waist and resumes his place on the divan as NERVOUS, his secretary, enters. NERVOUS is clad only in the skin of a bear. He bows low before SATAN.*)

SATAN (*nodding towards the entrance*): What are they making all that noise about?

NERVOUS: - They are afraid lest you should allow God to escape.

SATAN (*contemptuously*): Is that all. They needn't worry! (*NERVOUS is about to withdraw. SATAN calls him back*): Nervous, I thought I told you to change that costume.

NERVOUS (*regarding his bear skin*): Don't you like it?

SATAN: Like it! It's prehistoric. We've got to be ahead of the World, not two thousand years behind it!

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NERVOUS: I'm sorry.

SATAN: You haven't got enough to do, that's what's the matter with you. The job's too easy.

NERVOUS: You never pay me any wages. How can I buy new clothes?

*[The rumbling of voices outside increases in volume.]*

SATAN: You'd better have a word with that crowd outside. As usual they seem to think I'm asleep.

NERVOUS: I'll speak to them. *(He goes to the entrance and holds up his hand. The noise outside dies down. NERVOUS addresses the crowd . . .)* People of hell, keep silence, and listen to the words of Satan, our master. *(SATAN spits out an apple pip)* Even now, as I speak to you, our brave ambassadors are at work up there on earth *(he points upwards)* and while Satan lives there is no chance for God to escape. *(Cheers from outside)* God is in prison! *(Renewed cheers. SATAN spits out another apple pip.)*

NERVOUS: We shall see to it that he never escapes.

*[Doubtful mutterings from outside.]*

SATAN: Just a minute.

NERVOUS: What?

SATAN: Tell them if any man thinks he can run the show better than me let him come and do it.

NERVOUS *(to the crowd)*: And if any man among you believes he is more fitted to rule over the Earth than our illustrious Satan, then let him now step forward.

*[Voices . . . "No" . . . "No".]*

*[As NERVOUS is about to exit an old sack is let down through the hole in the ceiling on the end of a piece of string.]*

**SATAN** (looking at the sack): Hullo. Visitors. Wait and see who it is.

*[Two men appear at the entrance. They are contemporaries of Jesus Christ. They are dressed as Arabs. They bow to SATAN.]*

**SATAN** (to the first one): Well, if it isn't old Lazy! (He holds out his hand) Have you had a good time?

**LAZY** (shaking hands): Not bad.

**SATAN** (to the second one): And Misery! I'm glad to see you. (He shakes hands with MISERY) My word, where did you get those clothes?

**MISERY** (pleased with himself): They're all right, aren't they? We bought them in a place called Jerusalem.

**SATAN**: Jerusalem? Where's that?

**MISERY**: I'll show you.

*[He turns to a large globe that stands near SATAN.]*

**SATAN** (waving him away): Never mind now. Sit down and tell me all about it. (To LAZY) Everything going on nicely?

**LAZY**: Yes, things are not too bad at all.

MISERY: I brought one for you.

*[He picks up the sack and takes from it an Arab turban which he gives to SATAN.]*

SATAN: Good. You see, Nervous, keep up-to-date.

*[He puts on the turban, inspects himself in a hand mirror, and throws the Egyptian hat to the floor.]*

*As the conversation continues, NERVOUS surreptitiously retrieves the Egyptian hat and puts it on his own head.]*

SATAN: Well, now, let's hear the latest news.

LAZY: There's nothing much to report. Your "aristocracy" idea did the trick in Rome all right.

SATAN: Yes, I thought it would.

NERVOUS: "Aristocracy"? What's that?

SATAN (*with a groan*): Oh! Look here, Nervous, I shall have to get rid of you if you can't pull yourself together. Tell him what it is, Lazy.

LAZY: Well, "aristocracy"—our "aristocracy"—is a sort of exalted form of unemployment. They are people who take everything and do nothing, till in the end they either go rotten and die, or else the others rise up and kill them off. (*To SATAN*) In Rome it was a bit of both.

SATAN: One of the first ideas I ever had. And

*[He proceeds to do this by chipping a slab of stone with chisel and mallet.]*

SATAN (to LAZY): And what else?

LAZY (thoughtfully rubbing his chin): Let me see. I think that's about all. Everything's going on well. (To MISERY) I don't think there is anything else, is there?

MISERY (who is engaged in picking his teeth): There's a new Prophet come to life. We left Hopeless up there to report on what he does.

*[A voice shouts from above.]*

THE VOICE: Anybody awake?

LAZY: That's him now.

SATAN: Yes, come on, Hopeless!

*[HOPELESS enters. He may be dressed in any costume suggestive of 15th-century Europe.]*

SATAN (as soon as he sees him): Hullo. This hat's old fashioned. (He takes off his turban. HOPELESS bows down before him) Well, Hopeless, how's things?

HOPELESS: They're getting along pretty well just now.

SATAN: Did you bring me a new hat?

HOPELESS: Yes, here you are.

*[He produces a hat which he has been holding behind his back. It is similar to the one he is wearing himself.]*

SATAN: Good. You can have this, Nervous. (He throws him the turban) You'll still be out of date but it's better than nothing. (He takes

HOPELESS (*sitting down*): Yes, thanks.

SATAN (*pointing to a large Bible which HOPELESS is carrying*): What's that you've got?

HOPELESS: This is what they call the Bible. (*He turns to LAZY and MISERY*) You remember that Jesus?

SATAN: Jesus? (*To MISERY*) That's the prophet you were talking about, is it?

MISERY: Yes. (*To HOPELESS*) He's not still alive, is he?

HOPELESS (*scornfully*): No fear! He's been dead for ages. I didn't have to do anything about it. They killed him.

SATAN (*with a chuckle of delight*): I can always rely on them to kill the wrong man!

[NERVOUS *also chuckles, and commences to chip his stone again.*]

HOPELESS: But he didn't die altogether. He left this behind.

[*He holds up the Bible.*]

SATAN: And what is it?

HOPELESS (*not too sure of himself*): Well, it's His teachings. And now somebody has invented what they call "printing", so everyone can have one of these to read.

[*At the word "printing" NERVOUS looks up from his chipping in alarm. He bends over to have a closer look at the Bible.*]

SATAN: Printing? Let me look.

[*Realising that his chipping work is wasted, NERVOUS throws his tools to the ground in disgust.*]



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SATAN *takes the Bible from HOPELESS, turns it over and over and then inspects it inside. He gives a reluctant grunt of admiration.*]

SATAN: Hm! Not bad. Some of them are clever, you know, but what's it all about?

HOPELESS: It's what they call "Christianity". I thought at first it was going to get dangerous, but I think I've fixed it all right now.

SATAN: What did you do?

HOPELESS: They were all beginning to take an interest, so I started them squabbling among themselves. And now, instead of being banded together there's dozens of different "Christianities". Each one thinks it's the only one that's right, and they all hate the sight of all the others.

SATAN (*with a laugh*): That's the stuff! Here, have a medal.

[*He takes a medal from the box beside him and throws it to HOPELESS who catches it.*]

HOPELESS: Thank you. (*He looks at it*) What do I do with this?

SATAN: Haven't you seen a medal before? You pin it on your chest. Here (*he taps his chest.*)

HOPELESS: Like this. (*He pins it on.*)

SATAN: That's it. The idea is that it makes you feel a better man than you are.

HOPELESS: Oh, I see.

SATAN: But I think you'd better get on up again, Lazy, we can't afford to leave them alone altogether.

LAZY: All right. (*He gets up*) Anything special to do?

SATAN: Just keep your eyes open.

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HOPELESS: Europe's the place to go now. Along the Mediterranean and take the third turning to the right. That's Spain! Music, sunshine—lovely women!

SATAN: Don't go falling into temptation yourself.

LAZY: Don't worry. I can take care of myself!  
[*He winks and exits.*]

SATAN: You fellows have all the fun. How would you like to be stuck down here? (*He picks up the Bible and looks at it*) I can't be bothered to read this. What's it all about?

HOPELESS: It starts off by telling them how it was that God made the World in the first place. Then it goes on . . .

SATAN (*impatiently*): Yes, yes, never mind details. What does it all boil down to—in one word.

HOPELESS: One word!

SATAN: Yes. I don't want a whole rigmarole.

HOPELESS: It's Christianity.

SATAN: Yes, you've said that, but what does it mean?

HOPELESS: It's all in there. I can't tell you in one word.

SATAN (*angrily*): Then somebody's got to, or I'll know the reason why. Do you suppose I'm going to read all this?

HOPELESS: Well, if you must have it in one word, I suppose it means "Brotherhood".

SATAN: "Brotherhood". (*For a moment there is silence as he thinks this over. For the first time since the play opened his expression becomes really troubled. He repeats it*) "Brotherhood". (*Suddenly he bursts out angrily*) Why, you silly pair of blunderheaded idiots, don't you

## GOD'S JAILER

see that's the one thing we can't allow! (*They are all scared but can say nothing. SATAN looks down at the Bible again*) I'll have to read this book, even if no one else does! (He turns to NERVOUS, *who is gaping with his mouth open*) Well, Nervous, don't sit there like that. Close your mouth and think!

NERVOUS: What is "Brotherhood"? I don't understand what it means.

SATAN: No, you wouldn't. (*He turns to the others*) Why didn't you tell me more about this Jesus?

HOPELESS: I don't think there's anything to worry about. Everything's going all right.

SATAN (*more to himself*): "Brotherhood". (*Suddenly he turns to NERVOUS*) Quick! Run and see if God's still locked up. He'll be getting out before we know where we are! Here, take the key. (*He gives him a huge key from under his pillow. NERVOUS hastily exits through the door marked 'Jail'. For a moment SATAN thoughtfully rubs his chin. Then he slaps his knee excitedly*) I've got it! "Patriotism". That's the thing! Look, you get back up, Misery. Go and tell them all about it.

MISERY (*standing up*): "Patriotism"? What's that?

SATAN: Never mind. They'll know what it is. They'll love it. Go on. Don't waste a second.

[*MISERY hastens towards the exit repeating the word "Patriotism" as he goes.*]

SATAN (*calling after him*): Wait a minute!

[*MISERY stops half-way.*]

SATAN: Give them flags and drums and all that sort of thing. National anthems—anything you can think of. And I tell you what, talk to them about "duty". That's the idea; start them off on that.

## GOD'S JAILER

HOPELESS (*butting in in alarm*): Here, steady on, that's a bit dangerous, isn't it?

SATAN: What is?

HOPELESS: You don't want to say too much about "duty".

SATAN: Of course you do! Remind them as often as you can. They haven't the faintest idea what it means. Mention "duty", and the first thing they think of is a cannon. Go on, Misery, get busy on that. Drums and duty.

MISERY: Yes, very good, boss.

*[Again repeating the word "Patriotism" as though he might forget it, he exits.]*

SATAN: I'll give them "Brotherhood"!

*[He takes a medal and pins it on his own chest. NERVOUS enters.]*

NERVOUS: It's all right. He's still there. (*He hands him back the key.*)

SATAN: Good. Now, look, we've got to get busy on this printing idea. (*From the floor beside him he picks up a printed notice which says "Printing Department". He hands it to NERVOUS*) Hang this up on that door. (*NERVOUS does so*) Now sit down and take out your pen. (*NERVOUS does as he is told, producing a fountain pen from the pocket of his bearskin*) We'll give them "Texts" and "Mottoes", and print them by the million! Take this down. (*He dictates*) "Thy neighbour is thy Brother."

NERVOUS (*repeating each word as he writes*): Thy . . . (*He looks up*) How do you spell "neighbour"?

SATAN: If you can't spell it, draw it.

NERVOUS: How can I draw a neighbour?

SATAN: You know what a neighbour's like, don't you?

## GOD'S JAILER

NERVOUS: No. I've never seen one in my life.

HOPELESS (*to the rescue*): N. E. Y. B. O. R.

NERVOUS: Good. That'll do. (*He writes again*)  
Thy neybor is thy Brother. (*He looks up*) But  
that's ridiculous.

SATAN: You just write what I tell you. (*He dictates again*) "Be kind to all men."

HOPELESS (*butting in again*): But they're the  
things the Bible teaches!

SATAN (*impatiently*): I know, I know. You leave  
it to me, I know what I'm doing—er—"Let  
there be peace in this house."

HOPELESS (*threateningly to SATAN*): Look here,  
are you on our side or aren't you?

SATAN: My dear old Hopeless, I sometimes  
despair for you. I'm going to print millions of  
these on nice little cards, with flowers round the  
edges. They'll repeat them to each other and  
hang them on their walls and send them to  
their friends—and then they'll be completely  
satisfied. I haven't been at this job all my life  
for nothing! "Texts" and "Mottoes". That's  
the thing. Make it easy for them. Give them  
enough "Texts" and they'll *all* think they're  
being Christians! Go on, Nervous, take that in  
there and tell them to get busy.

[*He points to the printing department.*  
NERVOUS *exits.*]

SATAN (*to HOPELESS*): Now then, is there still  
plenty of gold up there?

HOPELESS: Yes, I think so. But I meant to tell  
you. When I left, a fellow named Columbus  
had just discovered America.

SATAN: Bless my soul, hadn't they found that  
before? What are they going to do with it?

## GOD'S JAILER

HOPELESS: They hadn't quite made up their minds. I think they're going to start a new nation.

SATAN: What! Another! Oh, well, that suits me all right, but they'll want some more gold. You'd better take some up. (*From under his divan he drags out a large lump of rock.*)

HOPELESS: I don't want to cart any more of that stuff about. It's no good for anything.

SATAN: Gold is a precious metal of great worth as a distorter of values. Besides, what on earth are they going to do in America if there isn't any gold? You get on up with this, or before we know where we are they'll have time to think.

HOPELESS (*in alarm*): Oh, no! Not that! Don't give them time to think!

SATAN: Then get on with your job.

[HOPELESS picks up the rock. NERVOUS enters from the printing department with a handful of printed texts.]

SATAN (*to NERVOUS*): That's the boy! (*NERVOUS hands him some of the texts. SATAN looks at them*) That's the idea. Have you sent some up above?

NERVOUS: Yes. Millions.

SATAN: Good. (*He turns to HOPELESS, who is about to exit*) Here, take some of these. (*He gives him a handful of medals from the box*) Introduce the idea up above.

HOPELESS (*taking the medals*): Shall I? Who shall I give them to?

SATAN: I don't care. Anyone above the rank of Corporal.

HOPELESS: Oh! Righto. (*He exits*).

## GOD'S JAILER

NERVOUS (*indicating more texts which he is holding in his hand*): I made a few up myself.

SATAN (*doubtfully*): Oh, did you? Let's have a look. (NERVOUS *hands him the remainder of the texts. SATAN takes the top one and reads it aloud*) "It is better to give than to receive." Mm. Much better. Much easier, too. Yes, that's not bad. I'll give you a medal for that. (*He does so.*)

NERVOUS (*overjoyed*): Oh, thank you!

[*Hanging on the wall is one of those old-fashioned house telephones, consisting of a speaking-tube with a whistle in the end of it. This whistle now whistles.*]

SATAN: Hullo. See who that is.

[NERVOUS *answers it.*]

NERVOUS: Hullo. . . . Who? . . . Well, go on, what's the trouble? . . . Just a minute. (*He turns to SATAN*) It's Lazy. He says there's a man up there trying to start a new religion.

SATAN: Is there? That's splendid. See that he gets every encouragement.

NERVOUS (*to the tube*): That's splendid, Lazy, don't stop him, for hell's sake!

SATAN: If anyone thinks he knows better than Jesus let him have the opportunity for saying so.

NERVOUS (*still at the tube*): What? . . . Oh! . . . Just a minute. (*He turns to SATAN again*) He says he's sorry but he's made a mistake. It's not a new religion, it's only a new branch of the Christian religion.

SATAN: That's better still. The only thing I *don't* want is one Christian religion.

NERVOUS (*to the tube*): That's better still.

SATAN: Ask him how many Christian religions there are now.

## GOD'S JAILER

NERVOUS: Satan wants to know how many there are now. . . . Oh! (To SATAN) He says he's lost count.

SATAN: Grand!

NERVOUS (*with a grin*): He says "Grand". Good-bye. (*He hangs up.*)

SATAN: Look here, I've had another idea. Go and tell them to print a lot of sermons.

NERVOUS (*in surprise*): Sermons?

SATAN: Yes, sermons. Print thousands of them. Make them as dull as ditch water, and then see that they get to every parson on earth.

NERVOUS: But you don't want parsons to preach!

SATAN: Of course I do! You give them dull sermons and they'll preach dull sermons. Go and do as you're told. There's nothing I like better than a dull sermon! Here you are, take these with you. I want to read the Bible.

[NERVOUS *exits to the printing room, taking the texts with him. SATAN helps himself to an apple and commences to read the Bible. In a moment LAZY enters dressed in the costume and large feathered hat of an eighteenth-century beau. He carries a large paper bag in his hand.*]

SATAN (*looking up*): Bless my soul, what's this?

LAZY: My word, things are looking up!

LAZY (*proudly displaying his costume*): Not bad, is it?

SATAN: Did you bring me one of those hats?

LAZY: Sure! (*He holds up the paper bag.*)

SATAN: What's that you said?

LAZY: I said "sure".

SATAN: And what does that mean, pray?



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LAZY: It means "yes" I guess.

SATAN (*aghast*): You what?

LAZY: Say, boss, you *are* behind the times! There's a new nation come to life. They're trying to start a new language. This is it.

SATAN (*unimpressed*): Oh, well, give me my hat.

[*LAZY hands him the paper bag. NERVOUS comes in again.*]

NERVOUS (*on seeing LAZY*): My word!

LAZY (*again preening himself*): Pretty snappy, isn't it?

[*SATAN has put his new hat on. He hands the old one to NERVOUS.*]

SATAN: Here you are, Nervous, you can have this now.

NERVOUS (*taking the hat*): Gee! If that ain't the cutest thing!

SATAN (*roaring*): What! Look here, you stop that kind of talk. Both of you. Do you hear me?

NERVOUS and LAZY (*together*): Yes, boss.

SATAN: Any more of that and I'll let God out! (*He glares at them and then strides up to NERVOUS*) Give me back that medal.

[*He takes it from him and flings it back into the box. NERVOUS and LAZY sit down.*]

SATAN (*subsiding*): Well, Lazy, has anything changed besides the fashions?

LAZY: No, nothing much. Misery has been putting over that "Patriotism" stuff. You know, "flags" and "duty" and all that. It's going like hot cakes. "Brotherhood" hasn't got a chance!

NERVOUS (*butting in*): How about aristocracy?

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LAZY: I'm afraid that's going to get played out before long. We shall have to think of something else.

SATAN: Why? What's the matter with it?

LAZY: Well, it's this way, boss. We gave them the idea, and they decided who were to be aristocrats and who weren't. . . .

SATAN (*interrupting*): How did they do that?

LAZY (*with a shrug*): Don't ask me! If I tried to understand them I should go mad. Now they're having a revolution.

SATAN (*growing more and more perplexed*): Revolution?

LAZY: Yes. It's a sort of game. You get up early in the morning and go out and shoot all your neighbours. Everybody kills everybody else.

SATAN (*getting frantic*): But why? What for?

LAZY: Because that shows that they're all as good as one another.

[SATAN scratches his head in despair. He is about to ask another question, but gives it up.]

SATAN: Oh, well, never mind. Let's hear what you've done about it.

LAZY: I got an idea from those texts you sent up. There was one said, "And the greatest of these is Charity."

NERVOUS (*excitedly*): That's right. That was one of mine. I copied it out of the Bible.

SATAN: Shut up. (*To LAZY*) Well, go on.

LAZY: They didn't know what Charity was, so I told them it meant giving to the poor. They liked that idea, so they stopped fighting and took to Charity instead.

## GOD'S JAILER

SATAN: That's fine! "Giving to the poor." (*He laughs*) Here, have some of these. . . . (*He dives into the box and gives LAZY a handful of medals.*)

NERVOUS: I can't see anything funny in that.

SATAN: No, you wouldn't! (*He chuckles again and turns to LAZY*) That's the best thing you've ever done. There will be aristocrats for ever!

LAZY: Unless, of course, they should find out what Charity really means.

SATAN: Don't worry about that! Anything else?

LAZY: No, I think that's about all.

SATAN: And good enough, too! You'd better take a holiday. (*At this moment their attention is distracted by a steel pulley which is let down through the ceiling on the end of a rope and hook. Attached to the pulley is a bowler hat*) Hullo! What's this?

[*The pulley is followed by MISERY, who comes in dressed in the dullest and drabbest of mid-Victorian men's clothes, and wearing a bowler hat several sizes too small.*]

SATAN: Holy Fathers, what is it? Why, it's Misery, by all the Saints! What on earth have you got on?

MISERY (*ashamed of himself*): It's not my fault. This is what they're wearing now.

SATAN: But that's terrible. What have you been doing to them? You've gone too far altogether!

MISERY (*with a sly wink*): It's all right, boss, I've had a pretty good time. You try this hat on.

[*He unties the bowler hat from the pulley and hands it over. SATAN holds it at arm's*

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*length for a moment, then he takes off his fine feathered hat and compares the two.]*

SATAN (*with a sigh*): Here you are. (*He hands the feathered hat to NERVOUS, and then again looks at the bowler*) Oh, earth, what I have suffered for thee!

*[He plants it on his head. It is several sizes too small. NERVOUS puts on the feathered hat.]*

LAZY (*pointing to the pulley*): What's that?

MISERY: Ah! That's what I've got to tell you about.

*[He unhooks the pulley from the rope and puts it on the table in front of him. The rope is hauled up again.]*

MISERY (*to SATAN*): You see, boss, I wasn't at all happy about things. They seemed to be getting out of control, so I did a pretty smart bit of work. I gave them machinery.

SATAN (*quietly, but with terrible anger*): You did what?

MISERY (*suddenly very nervous*): I gave them machinery.

SATAN: You gave them machinery! You miserable little rat! (*He seizes him by the throat*) Haven't I told you that's the most dangerous thing you could do? (*He shakes him*) What the hell do you mean by it?

MISERY (*struggling to release himself and gasping for breath*): It's all right, boss. I'll explain it.

SATAN (*shaking him again*): Explain it! How can you explain it? Didn't I tell you never to mention machinery?

MISERY: I know, boss. Aow! Let go. Boss, please, let me tell you.

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SATAN: Tell me! (*He throws MISERY aside*) I'll let you tell me all right! (*He replaces his hat and sits down. MISERY also picks up his hat, but can hardly speak*) Come on, out with it!

MISERY (*slowly recovering*): It's all right, boss, they don't know how to use it.

SATAN: No, but they might learn—and where shall we be then?

MISERY: But you don't understand. I've started an industrial era. They've gone mad about it. At first they wouldn't have the machines at any price. They smashed them up and fought over them.

SATAN (*surprised, and calming down a bit*): Oh! Why? What did they do that for?

MISERY: I don't know. I was terrified. I was afraid they were going to chuck them out altogether. Then they got over that and now everything's industry, competition, markets. They're going mad. It's wonderful.

SATAN: Yes, you blithering idiot, but very soon they'll get over that, too! Don't you see? Machinery means less need for what the silly mutts call "work". And less work means more leisure.

MISERY (*excitedly*): I know. But that's what we want! They'll be idle—and "Satan finds work for idle hands to do." Don't you see?

SATAN (*throwing up his hands in disgust*): Oh, my God! You featherbrained ass! That's one of *my* mottoes. I sent it up from here.

MISERY (*astonished*): You sent it!

SATAN: Of course I did. I don't want them to be idle. That's the last thing I want!

MISERY (*in agony*): You don't want them to be idle? But why?

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SATAN: Why? Because idleness means leisure. And once they find out what "leisure" really means they'll learn how to use it. And when they do that they will have begun to think. And when they begin to think we're done for. That's why.

MISERY (*with a smile, his confidence returning*): Oh, no, Satan, that will never happen.

SATAN: I wouldn't like to bet on it!

[*The voice of HOPELESS is heard excitedly calling down from above.*]

HOPELESS: Are you down there, boss, are you down there?

SATAN: Hullo, is that you, Hopeless?

HOPELESS: Yes, I'll be down in half a second. There's great news! (*In a moment he hurries in. He is dressed as a present-day farm labourer, with corduroy trousers fastened in at the knees. He is wearing a tin hat and carries another slung over his arm*) Here, try this on! (*He unslings the tin hat from his arm and hands it to SATAN.*)

SATAN (*taking it*): What is it?

HOPELESS: It's a hat, like mine. (*He turns to MISERY, the light of triumph in his eyes*) It's your machinery that's doing it, Misery. It's great.

MISERY: There! I told you so.

SATAN: All right, don't get too excited. (*He takes off the bowler hat and hands it to NERVOUS*) Here, Nervous, take this.

[*Reluctantly NERVOUS discards his feathered hat for the bowler. SATAN tries on the tin hat.*]

SATAN (*approvingly*): Hm! Seems all right.

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HOPELESS: Of course it is. It's a most becoming hat. And what's more, it's made to last. They're all wearing these now.

SATAN: Good. How did it begin?

HOPELESS: Oh, everything helped. The drums and flags, and the sermons you sent up, and the mottoes . . .

MISERY (*interrupting*): But my machinery started it. I told you they wouldn't know how to use it.

HOPELESS: Use it! Why, they can now kill ten men where only one died before! Then I hopped in with "patriotism" and "duty" and all that. Gosh, it's great! "Mother love" is the thing. Go the right way about it and all the women will send off their sons and husbands and wave flags and cry and go into mourning—and then send off more sons and more husbands—oh, I tell you, there's nothing like it.

SATAN: Yes, but what made you begin it?

HOPELESS: They were getting too peaceful. Too much time to think things out for themselves. They even began to talk about "women's rights". That scared me properly. I don't trust women. They've been our best ally up to now, but give them an inch and they'd take a mile. So I got things moving, and now I reckon you can let God out if you like, for all the good He'll do.

SATAN: Yes, but don't let's lose our heads. Look, you'd better go up again, Lazy. I don't trust these violent outbursts. They might come to their senses.

HOPELESS: Never. They haven't got any.

SATAN: Go on, Lazy.

LAZY: O.K., chief. (*He hurries out.*)

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HOPELESS (*shouting after him*): And don't forget, "A boy's best friend is his mother." Put that over in the right way and we're set!

[LAZY disappears, and then a trumpet call is heard coming from a distance. For a moment they all look at one another in alarm.]

SATAN: What's that? (*The trumpet call is repeated*) Go on, Hopeless, see who it is.

[HOPELESS goes to the entrance and looks up.]

HOPELESS (*to SATAN*): I think it's the angel Gabriel.

SATAN (*in alarm*): Gabriel! What's he like?

HOPELESS: I can't see very well. I think he's coming down here. Yes, he is!

[*He quickly backs into the room again, NERVOUS and MISERY also show alarm.*]

SATAN: All right, all right, keep calm.

[GABRIEL, dressed in plus-fours, enters. He looks a typical example of the thousands of middle-aged stockbrokers one sees happily chasing a golf ball on a Saturday afternoon.]

SATAN: Well, Gabriel, you are a stranger, and no mistake!

GABRIEL: So this is where you work, is it?

[*He looks curiously at SATAN and his men and their surroundings—as though trying to get his bearings. His eye wanders round the room until it alights on the door marked "Jail". SATAN looks at him with amused interest.*]

SATAN: Yes, this is the office. But why are you all dressed up? Have you been on a holiday?

GABRIEL: I have. What else is there for me to do?



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SATAN: Yes, quite so. Nervous, give the gentleman a chair.

[NERVOUS *pulls up a chair*. GABRIEL *sits down*.]

GABRIEL (to SATAN): Look here, old man, you're going a bit too far—it isn't good enough.

SATAN: Why? What's the trouble?

GABRIEL: You know what the trouble is. Ever since you got hold of that Bible you've been poisoning their minds, until at last you've set them at each others' throats. You're driving them crazy. They don't know what they're doing.

SATAN: Well, what do you want me to do about it?

GABRIEL: Will you take that hat off for a start?

SATAN: Why should I? It suits me, and I like it.

GABRIEL: Yes, I can see that, but will you take it off to please me?

SATAN: Oh. All right. Anything to oblige a pal. (*He endeavours to take off the tin hat but finds he can't. He gets rather frightened*) Hell! It won't come off!

GABRIEL: No! I didn't suppose it would. If you go too far you'll find, one day, that you have lost control. Then they'll turn on you and tear you to pieces.

SATAN: I don't think so. (*Once more he tries unsuccessfully to take off the hat*) Blast the thing! (*He gives up trying*) Oh, well, I'll chance it. (*The tube whistle blows. He turns to NERVOUS*) See who that is.

NERVOUS (*to the tube*): Hullo! . . . Who? . . . What? . . . Say all that again . . . all right, I'll tell him. (*He turns to SATAN*) It's Lazy. He says there's a guy up there trying to stop them

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selling any more liquor, there's another guy trying to start a league of nations, and somebody's going off the gold standard.

SATAN: I do wish they wouldn't refer to people as "guys". This language business is getting me down.

GABRIEL: It's your own fault. If you would leave them alone they would be satisfied with one language.

SATAN: Oh, no, that wouldn't do. They might begin to understand one another! (*He turns to NERVOUS again*) Ask Lazy if they're still wearing these hats.

NERVOUS (*to tube*): Boss says are they still wearing tin hats. . . . (*He turns back to SATAN*) No, they've taken them off, but he says you may as well leave yours on, you'll probably want it again before long!

SATAN: I've got to leave it on. The damned thing won't come off.

NERVOUS: He wants to know what he's to do about these problems.

SATAN: I don't know. Why bother me about it?

HOPELESS: But you can't let them have a League of Nations. You don't want that.

SATAN: Don't I? (*He sighs*) I don't know what I want. This hat's so damned heavy. Why can't they leave me alone for a little while? (*For a moment he gives way to utter weariness*) I never rest. I never sleep. I daren't sleep. . . .

NERVOUS (*still holding the tube*): Well, what am I to tell him?

SATAN (*reflectively*): League of Nations. What do you think about it, Gabriel?

GABRIEL: It depends what they mean. The world is a league of nations—it always has been.

## GOD'S JAILER

SATAN: That's what I thought. (*He turns to NERVOUS*) Ask Lazy what it's all about.

NERVOUS (*scornfully*): He doesn't know.

GABRIEL (*to NERVOUS*): Is it real or artificial? Is it the will of the world, or the inspiration of a few?

NERVOUS: You can search me, guv'nor!

HOPELESS (*to SATAN*): In any case it sounds dangerous; you'd better destroy it.

SATAN: All right. (*He turns to NERVOUS*) Tell Lazy to smash it. (*NERVOUS turns back to the tube, but SATAN suddenly changes his mind*) No, wait a minute. Let it go on.

NERVOUS (*to the tube*): Are you there, Lazy? The League of Nations is O.K. Let them go ahead. . . . What? . . . Wait a minute. (*He turns to SATAN*) What about the gold and the liquor?

SATAN (*with an impatient wave of the hand*): I don't care. Let them do as they like. Tell him not to bother me with trifles.

NERVOUS (*to the tube*): Boss says don't bother him with trifles. (*He hangs up.*)

SATAN: Lazy seems to be losing his punch. When in doubt, do nothing—that's been my motto all through.

HOPELESS: Yes, and you'll "do nothing" once too often.

GABRIEL (*to SATAN*): You don't seem to think very much of mankind.

SATAN: Would you—if you were in my place?

GABRIEL: Perhaps not, but then I'm not in your place.

SATAN (*with a chuckle*): If I leave things alone they usually come my way. It's a very comforting thought, Gabriel.

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GABRIEL: Yes, I'm sure it is. But you *can't* leave things alone. You said so yourself just now. You *daren't*.

SATAN: You think that, do you?

GABRIEL: I don't think it, I *know* it. You haven't rested for a moment since the World began. You dare not pause even to look round you, or to judge of the road ahead. You are swept on by the weight of your own vile impetus. You cannot stop, even if you would.

SATAN: Is that what you came down here to say?

GABRIEL: No. It hadn't occurred to me until now. I came down to have a look at you. At you, and your men, and your methods—and it's done me a power of good. (*He stands up.*)

SATAN: I'm glad to hear it.

GABRIEL: You know, Satan, I used to picture you as a terrible and relentless figure, seated at the rudder, and steering the world to destruction. Now I see that you are nowhere near the rudder. You are rushing blindly and desperately—to destruction, no doubt, but you are no longer taking the whole world with you.

SATAN: Those must be very gratifying sentiments, Gabriel. But you forget I still hold the key.

GABRIEL: The key? (*He laughs.*) Keep it, Satan, keep it, for I see now that, do what you will, that door stands open. (*He points to the door marked "Jail"*) Au revoir, Satan.

[*With a wave of the hand he is gone, leaving the others gaping at the door in bewilderment.*]

HOPELESS: What does he mean by that?

[*No one answers him.*]

## GOD'S JAILER

SATAN (*more to himself*): Gabriel. "God in Man," I wonder, . . .

NERVOUS: Why should he feel any happier for seeing us?

SATAN (*in fear—as on a sudden revelation*): By heaven, if that were true!

[SATAN turns on the others.]

SATAN: We're a lot of fools. We think we've been clever, and all the time that old angel has been wandering around. We don't even know where he lives!

HOPELESS: I don't see what he can do.

MISERY: Don't worry, boss. Who's Gabriel, that you should fear him?

SATAN (*rising*): I'll tell you who he is. He's "God in man". Roaming the world. Going everywhere. And we can't stop him! (*He turns on them, suddenly*) Get on up—all of you—seek him everywhere, and when you find him destroy him—if it takes a thousand years.

HOPELESS: I wouldn't know him again if I saw him.

MISERY: He's the same as every other man. We can't kill the lot!

SATAN (*flying into a passion*): Don't argue, you miserable fools! Get on up. Do you hear me? (*They scurry in terror. SATAN is left standing. He raises his hands above his head and laughs triumphantly*) We'll get you, Gabriel, and then the world will be mine!

[GABRIEL'S voice is heard from a long way off.]

GABRIEL: Don't be too sure, Satan. Don't be too sure.

CURTAIN

# VASSALS DEPARTING

A Fantastic Comedy

by

STUART READY

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## CHARACTERS

IAGO, *a Major-General*

LEAR, *a pensioner*

NICK BOTTOM, *L.R.A.M. (Eloc.)*

HAMLET, *a student*

CLEOPATRA, *an ex-queen*

ROSALIND, *a Bright Young Thing*

DESDEMONA, *a grass widow*

## VASSALS DEPARTING

SCENE: *A room in the City of Created Effort.*

*Time: Somewhere between 1600 and to-day.*

*Window centre-back overlooking street. Door to street on L. of window. Other doors up R. and down L. Radio cabinet on R. of window. Settee well down against wall on R. Chair between window and main door. Small table L.C. Desk, with telephone, against wall on L. Small chairs. Furniture can be either modern or a mixture of modern and Elizabethan. Producers are at liberty to add little touches, such as a portrait or bust of Shakespeare draped with black material, modern sports gear. All directions are taken as from the stage.*

*On rise of curtain LEAR is seated on settee mending his robe. He has a large work-bag by his side from which he selects cottons and needles. He is dressed much in the manner of the latter part of "King Lear," but he wears spectacles and a pair of very shabby boots.*

*IAGO enters from the street. He wears a popular type of grey military shirt and a Sam Browne belt, but he has retained the more familiar nether garments. He is spruce, efficient, and exuding vitality.*

IAGO: Any news? Any telephone calls? Any——? (*Going over to LEAR and speaking loudly*) Has the telephone bell rung?

LEAR (*dully*): Eh?

IAGO (*impatiently*): Oh——! (*Going across to desk, he sits on it and picks up receiver*) Hello?



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I want Enquiries. (*As he waits, he kicks his heels against the desk and sings absently*) "King Stephen was a worthy peer—" Ahem. (*He checks himself with a cough*) Ah! Enquiries? My name is Iago—Major-General Iago. I for India—A for Apple— Got it? Well, I want to know if you have succeeded in establishing contact with the earth? The earth, my dear—a piece of mud entirely surrounded by gas. You have not? There is no reply? Thank you, my dear; that is all I want to know.

[*He replaces receiver, rubs his hands in satisfaction, and gets off the desk. He goes across to LEAR.*]

IAGO (*loudly, in LEAR's ear*): No news.

LEAR (*trembling*): No news?

IAGO: Nothing whatever. I make a formal inquiry every day. It must now be considered quite certain that we are entirely forgotten. (*Rubbing his hands briskly*) O.K. by me.

LEAR (*pathetically*): Forgotten? No, no! I've spent years on this menial task, always—always hoping for The Day. My daughters ought to be doing these little jobs for me—

IAGO: Oh, damn your daughters.

[*He is going briskly out, when DESDEMONA comes in from room on L. She wears an apron over the clothes she wore in Othello. She is carrying a bundle of socks, which she takes to chair by desk and commences to mend.*]

IAGO: Ah, the gentle DESDEMONA! (*He waits by the door for some sign of recognition, but she proceeds to work, shaking her head sadly the while*) A pox on this everlasting stitchcraft! (*Going over to her*) Can't you buy clothes without patching thingummies that are two centuries old?

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DESDEMONA (*sweetly sad*): These have memories.

IAGO: Memories! I'll say they have! God save the mark! Memories of being strangled every night in the family four-poster!

DESDEMONA (*correcting him*): Suffocated.

IAGO: Same thing. Forget it. The trouble with you people is that you will live in the past.

DESDEMONA: I cannot forget my husband.

IAGO: H'm; fine cop he is. Deputy-Commissioner for the local Boy Scouts! So busy organising jamborees that he can't come and strangle you occasionally just to show he loves you. (*Casually*) Now if you'd chuck it and hitch up with me——

DESDEMONA (*in horror*): No—no!

IAGO: Why not? We are free souls; creation doesn't condemn us to an everlasting ritual. You take it from me, our little song and dance called *Othello* was played before Jimmy One way back in the sixteen hundreds, and I'll bet no one ever shoved it on again.

DESDEMONA: Destiny must be fulfilled.

IAGO: Destiny my foot! Have you never heard of the Free Will problem? You have your bit of fun and forget there was ever a man called Shakespeare.

DESDEMONA: Fun? My dear Othello!

IAGO: There you go again! You're mad.

LEAR (*starting up*): Oh, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!

IAGO (*reproving him*): Oi! pipe down. You know quotations are considered bad form. When I become Dictator of the Shakesperean Colony I shall make it a criminal offence. Do something useful, can't you?

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LEAR: Why don't my daughters come and see me?

IAGO: Because you bore 'em, ranting on in the old style. They're perfectly happy running a sister act on the radio. You be satisfied with the pension they allow you.

[NICK BOTTOM *enters from street. He wears his usual garb of an Athenian mechanical, but he has added a particularly doggy cloth cap of the type one sees at a football match. In his hand he carries a copy of the "Amateur Theatre" or any other magazine of the stage.*]

BOTTOM (*going over to chair on R.*): Evenin' all! (*Slapping LEAR on the shoulder*) Evenin' dad.

IAGO: Nick Bottom, d'ye mean to tell me you've finished work for the day?

BOTTOM: I have an' all. Six-hour day in the weaving trade, an' don't you forget it. Got a trade union behind us. Now, we, the world's workers, are able to devote our leisure to cultural pursuits. (*Rising excitedly*) Here, they've offered me a part——!

IAGO: What, only one?

BOTTOM: Fits me like a glove—"Arms and the Man." (*Pulling script from pocket.*)

IAGO: Never heard of it.

BOTTOM: I am to play the man! (*Strutting*) Ah, that will ask some tears in the true performing of it!

IAGO (*warningly*): Now Bottom!

BOTTOM: Sorry. (*Going across to LEAR*) 'Ere, dad, buy a ticket for our show?

LEAR: No money. I immies away everything; I divided my kingdom on

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BOTTOM: 'Ere stow it! (*Going over to DESDEMONA*) What about you, miss?

DESDEMONA: I am a married woman.

BOTTOM: Are you? (*Scratching his head*) Oh, yes; that coloured gent. I forget all that old stuff. What about a couple of two-and-fours for you and the old man? (*Winking*) Or a boy friend?

DESDEMONA (*simply*): You mistake me, sir; I am not that sort of girl.

IAGO: You won't get anything out of her, or the old fellow—they've got religious mania. In this enlightened age they believe in a future life!

BOTTOM (*disgruntled*): That doesn't stop 'em takin' tickets for our show.

IAGO: Pah! they believe only in their own shows—Lear, Othello; Othello, Lear. They flatter themselves they were created to go on forever. A most pathetic fallacy! We all know that once created we have a soul, but that doesn't imply a body as well. We know nothing—nothing! I am Iago, once designed as the crook in a melodrama, but now I am free of creative bondage I am Major-General Iago, living a comfortable but active life among the Shakesperean Colony in the City of Created Effort.

BOTTOM (*doubtfully*): I hope there's nothing in all this eternity stuff. The past weren't no catch for me, I'll tell you. The dramatics was all right, but the weaving in them Athens days was bloomin' hard work. (*Anxiously*) Sure there's nothing in the news?

(*laughing*): Nothing, my lad; nothing. (*Going over to radio set*) You're as bad as these followers of Hamlet with his Undiscovered Country stuff.

[*He tunes in.* BOTTOM goes over to other

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*side of set to listen. The others drop their work and are all attention.]*

RADIO VOICE: Here is the news: It is reported that the Duke of Monmouth landed in England this evening, and that he is making his way through Dorset and Somerset, raising the peasantry against His Majesty King James the Second——

IAGO (*switching off*): What did I tell you? Not a word about Shakespeare!

BOTTOM (*in relief*): Of course not. It's all my eye.

DESDEMONA: We must have faith.

[HAMLET comes in from street. His dress is that of the Melancholy Dane we all know, but he wears, also, a soft black hat. He carries books and pamphlets.]

HAMLET: Greetings, friends. (*He goes to the table and busies himself with his papers.*)

BOTTOM (*to IAGO*): What's to do?

IAGO: Oh, don't you know? It's the Revivalist Campaign.

BOTTOM: Crumbs! I'm going to the movies. (*Making for street door.*)

HAMLET: Bottom. (*He hesitates*) Must you give yourself over to licentiousness? Have you no thought for the needs of your eternal body?

BOTTOM: You let my body alone. I'm going to enjoy myself. I've had enough of your preaching. What's the harm in a dramatic society? It keeps you out of mischief.

HAMLET (*with scorn*): Playboy!

BOTTOM: Playboy yourself! An' I'll act you off the stage any old day. You were nothing but a ham actor. (*Mimicking*) "Do not saw the air so much with the hands, thus——"

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IAGO (*reprovingly*): Bottom.

BOTTOM: Sorry an' all that, but this bloke makes me sick. Live and let live is my motto. I'm a skilled worker, and I'm entitled to me bit of fun without him draggin' my body into it. I can think for myself, can't I? I've got a head on me shoulders.

HAMLET: You have, my friend—an ass's head.

[*In sudden alarm BOTTOM claps his hands to his head, then realising that all is well, he advances threateningly.*]

BOTTOM: Blimey! You're asking for trouble—!

[*IAGO pulls the struggling BOTTOM away. The latter picks up his magazine and dumps himself down sulkily up R. HAMLET proceeds with sorting his papers, assisted by DESDEMONA.*]

HAMLET: Chairs wanted. (*LEAR does not hear.*)  
Chairs! (*LEAR stops his mending and shuffles over to L. to arrange chairs for the meeting.*)

BOTTOM (*to IAGO*): He didn't ought to have said that about my head, you know. It's a sore point.

IAGO (*impatiently*): Haven't you forgotten that pantomime trick?

BOTTOM (*ruefully*): I can't, Major; I've a sort of complex that way. It will always cramp my style—specially with the girls. Would you believe it, I took one to the pictures last night, and—and I bought her a bag of hay.

IAGO (*heartily*): You'll grow out of it.

BOTTOM (*musings*): Good hay, sweet hay, hath no fellow.

IAGO (*warningly*): Will you snap out of it!

BOTTOM: An' all because I had a bit of a cuddle

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and squeeze with that Titania. Eh, but she was grand! (*miserably*) But it never came to nothin'.

IAGO (*soothingly*): Learn your part.

[BOTTOM *pulls script from pocket. Lear having arranged a few chairs over L., takes a handbell from under the desk and stands at the window ringing it.*]

IAGO (*suddenly*): Silence that dreadful bell! (*recovering*). Ahem (*generally*). Sorry, sorry; awfully sorry.

[IAGO *hurries out to street. BOTTOM studies his part intently, occasionally closing his eyes and murmuring lines. HAMLET moves the table a little central and stands waiting.*]

DESDEMONA: Alas, the congregation is very late.

HAMLET: Have patience, sister. The call has yet to penetrate. Did you deliver the pamphlets?

DESDEMONA: Yes; but I fear many are quite beyond all hope.

HAMLET: We will see, we will see. We must concentrate on the tragedies; the comedies are harder nuts to crack—an hereditary taint, you know.

(*Examining papers*): Ah! Prospero?

DESDEMONA: I fear he has left the narrow path. He has become a conjuror at Masonic banquets.

HAMLET: S'wounds! What of that jingling fellow—Autolycus? Who canvassed him?

DESDEMONA: I think it was Grandpa.

HAMLET: Ask him, ask him.

DESDEMONA (*loudly, in LEAR's ear*): What about Autolycus?

LEAR: Who?

DESDEMONA: Autolycus? Did you call at his house?

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LEAR: Bless you, no; he called at mine. He's selling writing-pads.

DESDEMONA (*to HAMLET*): We shall never reform him.

HAMLET: Reform? Oh, reform it altogether! Not one but is bitten with the bug of gross materialism! Orlando—a signwriter! Dogberry—the newly created Chief of Police! Falstaff runs a snack-bar; Shylock is a pawnbroker; and e'en Polonius must become—a Member of Parliament! Oh, I could weep! (*hastily*) But I have that within which passes show.

DESDEMONA: Mine eyes do itch; doth that bode weeping?

LEAR: Howl, howl, howl, howl!

HAMLET (*glaring*): Silence, bald pate.

BOTTOM (*looking up from book*): 'ere, I'm trying to learn a part.

HAMLET (*to LEAR*): The idea is all right, old man, but you must reserve those outbursts for the proper place.

DESDEMONA (*at window*): Someone is coming!

HAMLET: Ah! (*going back to table*) Notable converts?

DESDEMONA (*looking out*): Cleopatra—Rosalind.

HAMLET (*rubbing his hands*): Not so bad. If we can gather them in, we shall have the rest eating out of our hand.

[CLEOPATRA and ROSALIND come in from street. CLEOPATRA is barely recognisable, in fact it is possible her hair has become quite blonde. She wears an elaborate sunbathing costume, complete with the inevitable breast-plates. ROSALIND is the epitome of modernity; she wears riding breeches and a yellow pull-over, and she is smoking a cigarette.]



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CLEOPATRA: Howdy, folks!

HAMLET: Sisters, for shame! Have you no clothes?

CLEOPATRA: Lordy, what's bitten him? Aren't these clothes?

HAMLET: I would have been happier had you come without them.

CLEOPATRA: I daresay you would.

HAMLET: Where is Antony?

CLEOPATRA: How should I know? On a blind, you bet your life.

HAMLET: Blind!

ROSALIND: Let's have it, Hammy. We haven't wasted a perfectly good evening just to hear you rant. What's the idea?

HAMLET: I am about to address a meeting, a call to repentance. I shall not keep you long.

CLEOPATRA: I'll say you won't. I have to be up in the mornings now I've got a job as a mannequin.

[LEAR attempts to show them into the seats provided, but they both prefer the settee. CLEOPATRA lounges back extravagantly; ROSALIND polishes her nails. DESDEMONA sits demurely over L.]

HAMLET (*clearing his throat*): My friends—my friends; I want to talk to you about your bodies. Are they all right?

CLEOPATRA: Well, speaking for myself—

HAMLET (*thundering*): They are not all right! You were created for a great destiny, souls patterned by the will of Shakespeare.

[LEAR and BOTTOM salute by extending the arm. BOTTOM immediately recovers himself and returns to his script.]

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There are those among you who deny the existence of a body, but I tell you that each and every one of you has a body that shall exist upon the earth for ever! (*gazing across at CLEOPATRA*). You were a Queen of Egypt. Has any one but Shakespeare any use for you?

CLEOPATRA: I wouldn't be too sure. (*The last word rhymes with Shaw.*)

HAMLET: Do you believe that your soul expires here in this City of Created Effort? (*beating his fist on the table*). I tell you—no. Your body goes on—and on. I see you—peopling the stages of the world!

ROSALIND: He's batty.

HAMLET: Back to your homes and equip yourselves for your destiny! Think not of your poor souls that must linger here and die, but of your eternal bodies. Go, and prepare yourselves!

CLEOPATRA: Not me. I had enough of being bitten to death by sand snakes.

ROSALIND: That goes for me, too; I'm not spending the rest of my life as a male impersonator.

HAMLET: Fools! Fools!

BOTTOM (*rising angrily*): I've had enough of this. How d'ye think I can learn a part in this row?

HAMLET (*wildly*): A part? I heard thee speak me a speech once—'twas Pyramus' tale to Thisbe. That's the only part you'll ever know!

BOTTOM (*in scorn*): What, that old curtain-raiser? Yes, and get four out of ten for Dramatic Endeavour. Not me! (*Going out to street.*)

CLEOPATRA (*rising to ROSALIND*): Coming? If we beat it quick we might just dodge the collection.

ROSALIND: Oh, all right. Where are we going?

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CLEOPATRA (*at door*): Round to the local. If I don't haul Antony out he'll be there till closing time.

[CLEOPATRA goes out. ROSALIND follows slowly, but lingers in the doorway.]

HAMLET (*in despair*):

Why, let the stricken deer go weep,

The hart ungalled play;

For some must watch, while some must sleep:

Thus runs the world away!

[*He scatters the pamphlets wildly, and buries his face in his hands on the table.*

DESDEMONA and LEAR attempt very nervously to clear up the mess.]

HAMLET (*looking up*): Can't you let things alone?

DESDEMONA: Can't we do anything to help?

HAMLET: Nothing, nothing!

LEAR: Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.

HAMLET (*hurling a book at LEAR*): Clear out! (*LEAR scuttles off L. followed by DESDEMONA.*) These tedious old fools.

[*He sits at the table, drumming impatiently with his fingers. ROSALIND saunters in from the doorway and regards him coolly.*]

ROSALIND: O, most gentle pulpiter! what tedious homily of love have you wearied your parishioners withal, and never cried, "Have patience, good people!" (*sitting on table and putting an arm round his shoulder*). Poor Hammy!

HAMLET (*petulantly*): Don't do that, and don't call me comic names.

ROSALIND: All right, Prince of Denmark (*slipping a cigarette case from her hip pocket*). Fag?

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HAMLET: I don't smoke. Neither should you.

ROSALIND (*walking up and down and blowing cigarette smoke*): Why don't you throw in the towel? You could have a good time here like the rest of us.

HAMLET: I don't want a good time; I want to fulfil my destiny.

ROSALIND: M'm; spook-hunting round a gloomy ruin—working yourself up in a muck-sweat so's you can bump off your uncle. And in the end—to be flattened out with rat poison by the girl's brother (*shaking her head*). It isn't worth it, my lad.

HAMLET (*eagerly*): But to go on and on! No sooner to have finished but to start again! (*rising*). Oh, Rosalind, Rosalind! we must have bodies (*striking his chest*). I feel it—here!

ROSALIND (*coaxingly*): Come and sit on the settee and tell me all about it.

HAMLET (*not heeding*): 'Tis not for myself alone. I cannot bear to see these glorious creatures breaking from the course for which they were fashioned. But a handful of faithful devotees, and the rest—pish! The Comedies I despair of—they were composed of frailty—but for the great and tragic figures there is no excuse.

ROSALIND: I don't know so much. Pretty tame for them. You couldn't expect poor old Macbeth to go hag-ridden 'til the cows come home.

HAMLET: And the Histories—the Histories! One might have expected something better of them. No glorious, bloody wars, no alarums and excursions. No, they are quite content with an occasional Tattoo!

ROSALIND (*taking his arm and leading him to the settee*): Stop pulling on the snaffle. Don't worry so much. (*They sit.*) You know, Hammy,

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I'm rather fond of you (*stroking his hair*). I've got a spanking little two-seater, and we could have no end of a good time. I'd take you for runs in the country.

HAMLET (*absently*): Would you?

ROSALIND: Anywhere you like—except Arden.

HAMLET: Woman, you know you are married to Orlando!

ROSALIND: What about it? You don't expect me to dance attendance on a husband who cares for nothing but all-in wrestling? No, I like you best—you've got more in you. (*Pause*.) I shan't scream if you kiss me.

HAMLET (*He is about to do so, rather absently, when LEAR shuffles in furtively. Jumping up.*): Save me, and hover o'er with your wings! What would your gracious figure?

LEAR (*confidentially*): I want my sewing.

[LEAR picks up his belongings and hurries off L.]

ROSALIND: I'm still here.

HAMLET: No, no, no! It's too horrible.

ROSALIND: Sorry you feel like that about it.

HAMLET: I will not step out of my character—out of my play. You are fair enough, but (*firmly*) No! If I must sin, it must be with a tragic figure.

ROSALIND (*jumping up*): Oh, I've no patience with you! You're just a silly prig! You're old-fashioned, and you're swollen-headed, just because you've got a body you think every one ought to get excited about. What I say is—bunk!

HAMLET (*holding his ears*): To a nunnery go, and quickly, too; farewell!

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[*He rushes off R. ROSALIND stubs her cigarette and throws it in a corner. DESDEMONA enters from L. with a supper tray containing a loaf of bread, beer, and a round Dutch cheese. She proceeds to lay the tray on the desk L.*]

ROSALIND: What's that?

DESDEMONA: The Lord Hamlet's supper.

ROSALIND: I hope it chokes him.

[*DESDEMONA goes off again L. ROSALIND goes up to street door, when CLEOPATRA appears.*]

You're soon back.

CLEOPATRA (*yawning*): Nothing else to do. I'm not hanging round a pub watching Antony play darts.

ROSALIND: Oh?

CLEOPATRA: Toby Belch and a whole crew of 'em. Looks like another gaudy night. Strikes me if that Hamlet isn't about right sometimes; we'd be better off doing our proper jobs in the next world.

ROSALIND (*impatiently*): The next world! What's the matter with this one?

CLEOPATRA: This one wouldn't be so bad if the licensing hours were a bit shorter (*lolling on settee and yawning*). Oh, that I might sleep out this great gap of time my Antony is away! Darts! I ask you. And never even offered me so much as a small mandragora. Going out?

ROSALIND: I am. I've got a date with young Romeo.

CLEOPATRA: Romeo (*with a sniff*). I wish you joy of the worm.

[*ROSALIND goes out to street. DESDEMONA*

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*comes in from L. with a cloth for the table, followed by LEAR with knives and plates.]*

DESDEMONA (*clearing books, etc., and handing them to LEAR*): Lay by these. (*Singing softly as she lays the table*) "Sing willow, willow, willow——"

CLEOPATRA: Hey! If you must sing, sing something cheerful.

DESDEMONA: Alas, I know no songs but sad ones.

CLEOPATRA: Then don't sing at all. Trouble with you is you don't get out enough. You and your blessed Tit Willow. Where's your old man?

DESDEMONA: He is training the younger generation for the pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war (*sighing*). I see so little of him these days (*brightening*). But there's a good time coming.

CLEOPATRA (*with a grunt*): Is there? Your matrimonial affairs were no picnic. Next time, you remember the colour bar if you want to be happy.

DESDEMONA: I am only happy when I am unhappy.

CLEOPATRA: You're a queer kid, you are. I admit I came to a sticky end, but I did have my fling. Fancy wanting to be strangled for six nights and a matinee!

DESDEMONA (*ecstatically*): He strangled so beautifully—so humanely!

CLEOPATRA: Oh, forget it. (*She goes over to the radio set*): We're back numbers, all of us. (*Switching-on the set*).

RADIO VOICE: Belgium: British and Prussian troops were entirely successful at Waterloo last

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night, and it is reported that Napoleon has fled to Paris—— (*She shuts it off.*)

CLEOPATRA: And the rest. Never get anything worth hearing these days. Who is this Napoleon, anyway?

[HAMLET comes in from R. DESDEMONA places a chair for him at the table, but he does not sit. DESDEMONA curtsies and goes off L. HAMLET stands by the table looking moodily at the supper.]

HAMLET: That it should come to this! (*Absently he picks up the round of Dutch cheese.*) Alas—alas, poor Yorick. (*He throws the cheese down impatiently and goes over to CLEOPATRA.*) Have I been wrong all this time? Is there such a thing as Eternity, or should we pig it here? Sometimes I am weary of this everlasting surmising (*sitting and holding his head*). Oh, Cleo, it's so difficult for me! I'm not the sort of fellow who can muck-in anywhere; I've no personality—no small talk.

CLEOPATRA (*sitting by him*): I know how you feel, mate. I'm the same sometimes.

HAMLET (*looking up*): Are you?

CLEOPATRA: Sure. All us tragic coves have got something that takes a bit of getting out of the system. You wouldn't believe it, but I dab on oil of lavender every time I see a snake.

HAMLET (*gazing at her*): You are very beautiful; I think I could love you.

CLEOPATRA: Eh?

HAMLET (*eagerly*): Yes, yes; I'm sure I could. You have lost something of your former nobility, but you are a great and glorious figure (*taking her hand*). And you were always very affectionate.



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CLEOPATRA: Well! If this be love indeed, tell me——

HAMLET: Perhaps—perhaps there is no future; that we just snuff out, a passing mood in our Creator's brain? Others have found happiness in this temporal state, so why not I? (*suddenly*) O, Royal Egypt! for your love I would gladly barter these slender chances of Eternity!

CLEOPATRA: Would you?

HAMLET: But I could not be happy with any lesser personage than a queen who killed herself for love.

CLEOPATRA: That's all very well, but I'm not killing myself a second time.

HAMLET: These others are foolish creatures, but you and I could find happiness together. Come away with me; I'm sure I could give you a decent home. I'd get a job. I'm quite well-read, a first-class swordsman, an inspired actor, a promising producer. We'd have a little cottage in some garden city, and live on Rhenish and shredded wheat. We'd hang out our washing, like banners——

CLEOPATRA: Oh, yes? (*rising*). No, thanks; you'd bore me stiff in a week. You try somebody else. Fancy me marrying a man who saw ghosts in the middle of the night.

HAMLET (*going on one knee*): Give me a wholesome answer.

CLEOPATRA: Nothing doing.

[*Enter BOTTOM from street.*]

HAMLET: Oh, hell!——

BOTTOM: Oi! Don't swear.

HAMLET (*putting his ear to the ground*): Swear! (*He lies prostrate.*)

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BOTTOM (*to CLEOPATRA*): Has he had one over the eight? (*going over to door L.*) Hi! (DESDEMONA *appears*). Your friend's in a bad way.

[DESDEMONA *runs on, followed by LEAR.*]

DESDEMONA (*trying to raise him*): My Lord Hamlet!

LEAR (*lifting his legs*): What, have his daughters brought him to this pass?

HAMLET (*struggling to his feet*): Unhand me, gentlemen!

[*He rushes out through street door, almost colliding with IAGO AND ROSALIND.*]

IAGO: If he's after a quick one, he'll have to hurry.

BOTTOM: Let him go. That bloke's always been a nuisance. I'm going to change my lodgings. Old Quince has offered me a back room for six bob a week (*pouring out glass of HAMLET's beer*). Nice and handy for rehearsals.

[BOTTOM *takes glass over to chair on R.* DESDEMONA and LEAR *proceed to clear supper table.* ROSALIND *goes over to door on R.*]

CLEOPATRA: Thought you were going out with Romeo?

ROSALIND (*in a bad temper*): Did you? Well, I didn't.

CLEOPATRA: Oh, sorry, I'm sure.

ROSALIND (*at door R.*): Romeo's all right; it's his family I can't stand. What sort of fun is it playing cards with the Montagues? Swords out every time you trump an ace. I'm going to bed.

[ROSALIND *goes off R.* IAGO *goes over to table and helps himself from the beer bottle* LEAR *has cleared.*]

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IAGO: Aren't we all nice and cheerful! (*raising bottle and singing*):

“ A soldier's a man;  
A life's but a span;  
Why then let a soldier drink! ”

BOTTOM: Oh, shove on the radio, and let's have a bit of dance music.

CLEOPATRA: Radio? Lot of good that is (*she switches-on*).

RADIO VOICE: Continuing our custom of broadcasting a play once a month, we are to-night presenting Shakespeare's “ A Midsummer Night's Dream.” The cast is as follows: Theseus — (*fading*).

BOTTOM: Blimey! (*He jumps up.*) 'Ear that?

[*All are affected. DESDEMONA and LEAR stop work and listen. ROSALIND comes to door of room on R.*]

IAGO: Damn it, it's fading!

CLEOPATRA (*excitedly*): Twiddle the knobs!

BOTTOM (*at set*): That's no good; the blinkin' battery's run out!

CLEOPATRA: Oh, it would! And the first decent programme for three hundred years!

IAGO: Listen!

[*From beyond the window comes the distant cheering of a crowd. BOTTOM works frantically at the set. LEAR goes over to the window.*]

LEAR: Soldiers, soldiers!

IAGO (*looking out of window*): Look at the people! Hundreds of 'em, all forming up like a Lord Mayor's Show. Falstaff, Malvolio, Juliet, Brutus, Cassio! (*leaning out of window*). Hi! Lieutenant Cassio! What's the news?

VASSALS DEPARTING \*

BOTTOM (*on his knees, attending to set*): S'sh!  
I see a voice!

[*Faintly at first, but becoming gradually stronger, the Mendelssohn "Midsummer Night's Dream" music comes through the radio set. All the characters remain perfectly still, listening. The crowd noise off grows louder. HAMLET comes in quickly from street.*]

HAMLET: Stand to your baggage! Join your companies! The Call has come! While we have slept the world has called to us. Our bodies live in the world of men and women. Come!

DESDEMONA: Whither?

HAMLET: To the stages of the earth—for ever.

[*The music swells: the cheers off grow louder. The music, now at its strongest, is that of the Clown's March (allegro molto). All the characters except HAMLET, who stands motionless by the window, are galvanised into action. BOTTOM stands at the window, waving to the crowd below. CLEOPATRA and ROSALIND hurry off R.; DESDEMONA and LEAR, L. IAGO watches from the window, his hand on BOTTOM's shoulder.*]

IAGO: Awake, awake! What ho, Brabantio! (*He rushes out to street.*)

[*CLEOPATRA and ROSALIND re-enter, each carrying bundles of clothing as for a journey.*]

ROSALIND: Jove, Jove! This shepherd's passion is much upon my fashion!

CLEOPATRA: Give me my robe; put on my crown; I have immortal longings in me!

[*These two go quickly out to street. LEAR enters from L. followed by DESDEMONA. Both carry their belongings, and LEAR has a crown in his hand. He goes to mirror and tries it on.*]

## VASSALS DEPARTING

LEAR: Aye, every inch a king!

BOTTOM: Where are these lads? Where are these hearts?

[BOTTOM *hurries off, followed by* LEAR. DESDEMONA *goes up to street door.*]

HAMLET (*to* DESDEMONA, *who is waiting for him at the street door*): Go on; I'll follow thee!

*The music continues.* DESDEMONA *goes.*  
HAMLET *follows quickly as*

CURTAIN

# FEAR NO MORE

by

M. H. NOËL-PATON

The name of the author—whose one-act plays are deservedly popular with amateurs—is also known to a wide public, through the B.B.C. productions last year, of two of her dramatised biographies, *Pandita Ramabai* and *Pennell of the Afghan Frontier*.

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## CHARACTERS

CARA, *a little dumb waiting-maid*

GIAN, *a young page*

THE CAPITANO, *a successful Condottiere*

THE COUNT OF RUGGIELLO

THE CASTELLANO DI SAN ROCCO

GUIDO TORREMONTE

} *three con-  
spirators*

DONNA LUCIA, *a beautiful Lombard*

TWO PALACE GUARDS

*The part of GIAN can be played by a girl as  
the page is only a young boy.*

*The part of CARA is entirely mimed.*

## FEAR NO MORE

SCENE I: *An ante-room in the Palazzo Publico of an Italian town in the first part of the fifteenth century. A door R. leads to the grand staircase and main entrance, a door L. to the state apartments, guard-room, and great hall. A window centre back gives upon a balcony overlooking the Palace court. There is a table to one side furnished with parchment, quills and ink. Against one wall stands a painted chest above which hangs a mirror in a carved gilt frame. Upon another wall should hang a contemporary portrait—or if preferred, a fresco could be painted on the wall—of a condottiere in full panoply of war. Other props required: A high carved chair, two branching candlesticks, a hearth with fire-tongs, a lace-maker's cushion with thread and bobbins ready for action.*

GIAN: Tell me, Cara, how long have you been in Donna Lucia's service?

CARA (*holds up two fingers.*)

GIAN: Two months?

CARA (*shakes her head; makes emphatic gesture with two fingers again, looks round for inspiration with puckered brows, then seizes both her ears and tugs at them.*)

GIAN: Two years? (CARA *nods vigorously; both burst out laughing. CARA resumes her lace-making*) Let me see: that must have been when the Capitano was fighting for Venice—the year they chased the Viper back to Milan.



## FEAR NO MORE

(CARA's face grows clouded. GIAN watches her curiously for a little, then) But how came you into the service of the Pearl of Lombardy?

CARA (*glances up at the portrait of the Condottiere which adorns the wall, then slipping from her seat, runs over and stands beneath the picture looking up at it. With quick, eloquent gestures she points first to it then to herself—her two hands on her breast—finally with hands thrown out indicates another person, evidently a great lady for she quickly drops a curtsy and then stands demurely with hands folded and eyes downcast.*)

GIAN: Oho! So the Capitano himself gave you to her—two years ago.

[*He ponders this for a moment, and CARA raises her eyes once more to the picture and gazes at it wistfully.*]

GIAN (*studying CARA's expressive little face curiously*): Tell me, Cara, were you born dumb?

CARA (*panic leaps into her eyes, and with a shake of the head she covers her eyes with her hands.*)

GIAN (*with the callousness of youth*): How did it happen then?

CARA (*pressing her hands to her temples, glances wildly round, her face contorted with terror, then rushes to GIAN and clutching him as though for protection from her memories, buries her face against his shoulder with a queer inarticulate cry.*)

GIAN (*nods grimly*): Oh, so that was how it was! (*Pats her awkwardly*) My brother served through that campaign and had some pretty tales to tell of the vengeance of the Visconti. (*Tries to comfort her*) Poor little Cara! I sup-

## FEAR NO MORE

pose by the time the companeers found you you couldn't even tell them your name? (CARA nods against his shoulder.)

GIAN (*loftily*): I am really named John, after the great free-captain who came from England and taught the States of Italy the art of modern war—though the land he came from, my father said—and he served under him for twenty years—was quite uncivilised. (*Condescendingly*) Never mind, Cara's not a bad name—nice and non-committal anyway. (CARA's frenzied clutch relaxes.)

GIAN (*with a love-lorn sigh*): Corpo di Bacco! It would be worth something to be called "Cara" and "Carina" every day of one's life by the beautiful, the exquisite, the incomparable Donna Lucia! (CARA raises a surprised face) You do not know how fortunate you are——

CARA (*considers him carefully, then begins to chuckle to herself*.)

GIAN (*letting go CARA says stiffly*): I don't see anything to laugh at! All Lombardy's in love with the Divine Lucia—the Capitano worse than most. . . .

[*Enter the CAPITANO L. with a letter in his hand. Both children get hurriedly to their feet. He strides up to CARA and holds out letter.*]

CAPITANO: Cara, take this to Donna Lucia, and bring me her reply. Quickly, child, quickly!

[CARA takes the letter from him, trembling, and sinks down in a deep curtsy. GIAN bows confusedly, hoping his master had not heard his last speech, but the CAPITANO takes no notice of him and strides off L. CARA jumps up, and running to the door through which he passed, gazes after him adoringly, the

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*letter in her hand. GIAN, to relieve his feelings, snatches the letter out of her hand.*

*CARA turns upon him like a tiger.]*

GIAN (*holding her off*): Keep off, Cara, I only want to see what kind of hand he writes—(*appeased but a little breathless, CARA studies the superscription of the letter*) Hm, not much of a scribe! My brother can write better than that, though he is but a foot-soldier. But then he was brought up in a monastery . . .

CARA (*snatches the letter from GIAN's sacrilegious hand, kisses the crooked writing, and pressing the letter to her heart glares defiantly at GIAN.*)

GIAN (*derisively, recovering from his surprise*): Oho! so that's the way, is it? (*CARA very near tears stamps her foot angrily*) The little hand-maid loves the Condottiere, the poor foot-page adores his master's mistress! Truly life is a fool's jest! (*A brief pause during which GIAN sits dejectedly, head in hand, and CARA studies the Condottiere's letter with lovely tenderness*) Listen, Cara mia! Would you like one of the Capitano's gloves for a keepsake? I could get you one—— (*CARA looks up with shining eyes which answer his question*) On our last campaign, at every castle where we spent the night, the Castellano's wife gave him a pair of broidered-gloves. He'd never miss one; he must have dozens—each with a different scent. A great breaker of hearts as well as of heads is our Capitano! (*He watches CARA closely but can detect no sign of jealousy on her ingenuous features. CARA's hero-worship is too devout to admit of anything so petty. She turns to him with her most radiant smile*) Very well then, if I get you one of his gloves to keep—— (*in answer to a descriptive gesture from CARA*) Yes, one he has really worn—will you let me take that letter to Donna Lucia?

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CARA (*draws back and looks hesitatingly at the letter, then at the door through which her hero passed, then nods and holds it out to GIAN.*)

GIAN (*taking it delightedly*): Cara, if you weren't just a little girl, I'd wear your gage in my helm for this! (*Makes for the door R, then halts, struck by a sudden thought*) Are you quite sure they'll let me give it her myself? (*CARA nods, and he goes out humming gaily.*)

(*She then climbs on to her chair and settles herself once more to her lace-making. Presently a noise—the clatter of horses' hoofs, or the thrum of a lute—makes CARA turn her head. Slipping from her chair she runs to the window and out on to the balcony, looking down over the balustrade so that she is not visible from the R. side of the room.*)

[*Enter R. the COUNT OF RUGGIELLO and the CASTELLANO DI SAN ROCCO. They hover uncertainly near the entrance.*]

RUGGIELLO: Guido Torremonte's late.

CASTELLANO: I passed a troupe of Mummers on the bridge. If Torremonte saw them, we may wait in vain!

RUGGIELLO: How so?

CASTELLANO: Do you not know our Guido's weakness? Were he on his death-bed he would rise from it to watch a mummers' play. Ah, here he comes.

[*Enter GUIDO TORREMONTE with a light quick step. He glances quickly round. CARA on the balcony hesitates a moment, then moves along it completely out of sight.*]

TORREMONTE: I hoped to be here first. (*He closes the door behind him*) I was delayed.

[*RUGGIELLO and the CASTELLANO exchange glances.*]

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RUGGIELLO: A cut-throat or a creditor?

CASTELLANO: A wench, I wager!

TORREMONTE (*calmly*): A fellow filched my purse. I chased him to the bridge-end and had him by his greasy throat, when a rout of mummers burst upon me crying and beseeching me to spare him, as to-night they are to play before the Duke, and this vile fellow plays Beelzebub. Without him, they said, their play was naught—their reputation lost.

RUGGIELLO: You let him go?

TORREMONTE: No artist could do otherwise. Actors are born, not made. But let that pass—(*He crosses L. to close the other door*) We must to business.

RUGGIELLO: Yes, yes—to business! (*The three conspirators draw together.*)

[RUGGIELLO, it will be noticed, walks with a limp. The CASTELLANO is deliberate and sparing in his movements; his favourite position is holding his right elbow in the cup of his left hand while he rubs his chin pensively; before speaking he often studies his fingernails intently. TORREMONTE is lithe and restless, scented and beringed. He wears a rose behind his ear; his heavy-lidded eyes always seem half-closed, but he has swift, sensitive hands. These mannerisms are important, but should not be overdone.]

CASTELLANO (*to TORREMONTE as he rejoins them*): What is it you say the Capitano knows?

TORREMONTE: He has discovered who sent the message to the Cardinal.

CASTELLANO: Corpo di Dio!

RUGGIELLO: If he betray his knowledge to the Medici, Florence will be no place for us with Cosimo in the saddle!

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TORREMONTE: That is why something must be done—at once.

RUGGIELLO: Who can have told him? The messenger was silenced—that at least we know.

CASTELLANO (*thoughtfully*): Good assassins are hard to come by nowadays; they must have bungled it.

TORREMONTE (*curtly*): No matter how, he knows!

RUGGIELLO: And so?

TORREMONTE: We hire no more assassins, amico mio, that is all!

RUGGIELLO: You mean . . . we do the work ourselves?

TORREMONTE (*suavely*): You have a penetrating mind, Ruggiello; you will go far!

CASTELLANO: If he suspects, it will be hard to come at him alone.

TORREMONTE: He does not know we know. Besides, at the State Ball to-night there will be lights to dazzle, wine to befuddle, and women to engross this meddler in other men's affairs.

CASTELLANO: Women!—Why not employ a jealous woman? There must be many, considering the Capitano's reputation . . .

RUGGIELLO: The Castellano's right, Torremonte. To a jealous woman, the deed itself would be its own reward.

CASTELLANO: Donna Lucia? Have you thought of her?

TORREMONTE: She's as infatuated with him as he with her. There's no help there.

RUGGIELLO: Not if you first disclose to her his last intrigue with Monna Yolanda?

TORREMONTE (*with patient scorn*): Whom will

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you find to tell her? She is as like to turn on the informer as the offender. No, no, my good Ruggiello, you may as safely trust a starving garrison in time of siege as a woman not yet surfeited with love!

RUGGIELLO: What does the Castellano di San Rocco say?

CASTELLANO: If there's no better way— (*Gives an expressive shrug*) His mouth at all costs must be stopped. (*Turning to TORREMONTE*) When shall it be?

TORREMONTE: I have it on good authority he'll dance the first galliard with Donna Lucia—

CASTELLANO: Well, what then?

TORREMONTE: We arrive late—too late to find us partners for the dance. We stand aside—one by each exit. When it is over, he will go, I think, to the alcove in the long gallery. . . .

CASTELLANO: What makes you think so?

TORREMONTE (*tapping his nose*): There have been preparations—

RUGGIELLO (*admiringly*): You have eyes like a lynx, Torremonte!

TORREMONTE (*superbly*): I am a Florentine. Enough—I know. But to continue. He leads the fair Lucia down the gallery, but dallying, for are they not in love? So one of us will reach the alcove first. . . .

CASTELLANO: That is ill-planned. The woman's screech would bring the guard. Besides, she'd be a witness. . . .

TORREMONTE (*coldly*): I am no fool! Suddenly there's a disturbance in the court, which—having left by the other door—I, Guido Torremonte, will create. They both lean out; then you, Ruggiello, step from behind the arras and knife him in the neck. . . .

FEAR NO MORE

RUGGIELLO (*startled*): I, Torremonte? I'm in no fighting trim! I took a fall at the Tourney yesterday. I could not tussle with that bull with my lame leg——

TORREMONTE (*unpleasantly*): Since when has the Count of Ruggiello——?

CASTELLANO: Enough! We need not quarrel. I'll drive the knife, and drive it willingly.

TORREMONTE: No bungling, mind! One swift, clean stroke; then fling your cloak over the woman's head, and go. If quickly done, you'll find the stairs deserted, all will be running to the court to see what's forward there.

RUGGIELLO (*sulkily*): What will be forward?

TORREMONTE: Leave that to me.

RUGGIELLO: And leave the killing to San Rocco here!

TORREMONTE (*hand on dagger*): If it's my courage that you call in question . . .

CASTELLANO: Come! Let's not quarrel! Someone might overhear.

RUGGIELLO (*in sudden panic*): God grant there's no one on the balcony! We should have thought of that.

TORREMONTE (*moving swiftly*): I will make sure. (*Steps out, halts suddenly, then lunges out of sight, to return dragging the terrified CARA*) Look what I have found!

CASTELLANO (*shaken in spite of himself*): Corpo di Dio! How long have you been there?

[CARA shakes her head wildly.]

RUGGIELLO: She has heard all—look at her face!

[The three conspirators exchange significant glances, then RUGGIELLO draws his dagger.]



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CASTELLANO (*stopping him*): That way's too crude, Ruggiello, and likely to put others on their guard.

RUGGIELLO (*resheathing his dagger*): Children sometimes—fall out of windows, do they not?

TORREMONTE (*bitingly*): They do. And live to tell the tale!

[CARA begins making strange inarticulate noises.]

CASTELLANO: Not if she fell from the tower; it is a hundred feet—on to stone flags.

TORREMONTE (*unable to make up his mind, shakes CARA roughly*): Whom do you serve? (*CARA continues to make strange noises*) Whom do you serve, I say? Answer, you little fool, or— (*Whips out his dagger. CARA's moans come quicker, and, throwing back her head, she opens her mouth and points to it*) Dio! the child is dumb!

[*The other two lean forward, and CARA in the frenzy of despair opens her mouth still wider, while they jostle to see inside.*]

CASTELLANO: Her tongue has been cut out!

RUGGIELLO (*immensely relieved*): And just as well for you, my girl, it has!

TORREMONTE (*still holding her*): It would be much safer to dispose of her.

CASTELLANO: But difficult to do discreetly.

[*All three consider her grimly.*]

RUGGIELLO: She looks too stupid to have understood. She's probably a half-wit.

TORREMONTE (*suddenly*): Listen to me, girl. It is a sin, punishable by death, to skulk on balconies and listen. We will spare your life on one condition—

FEAR NO MORE

[CARA emits two short sounds like "what". TORREMONTE propels her to the table, seizes a sheet of parchment, and thrusts a quill into her hand.]

TORREMONTE: Write out the Pater Noster, and we will let you live.

[He draws his dagger quietly and stands behind her ready. The CASTELLANO is about to speak, but thinks better of it. CARA sits and stares stupidly at the pen, then makes a few clumsy dabs at the paper, but, never having learned to write, she knows it is hopeless, and laying her head down on the parchment she sobs despairingly. The three conspirators relax with an audible sigh. TORREMONTE resheathes his dagger. Had she proved able to write it is obvious she would have had short shrift. They draw a little apart, and converse in low tones.]

CASTELLANO: She cannot talk, she cannot write—she cannot do much harm.

RUGGIELLO: Besides, these peasants are like animals—they have no brains.

TORREMONTE: I do not like leaving it at this.

CASTELLANO: We can't afford to have suspicions roused before to-night.

RUGGIELLO: She'd be more eloquent dead than alive!

TORREMONTE (*pensively*): There is always the well. . . .

CASTELLANO: Santa Madonna! Look, she is asleep!

[RUGGIELLO: Did I not say she was a half-wit?

CASTELLANO: Oh, she's safe enough!

RUGGIELLO: Come, then, let's go.

[They go out together, with a last back-

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*ward glance at the sleeping child. When the footsteps have quite died away, CARA opens her eyes and slowly and cautiously raises her head. She listens for a moment. There is the sound of horses' hoofs in the court below, riding away. CARA darts to the window, and, half hidden by the curtain, peers out; then turning she stands and surveys the room, her hands pressed to her temples, terror and resolve mingled in her face. Her glance travels from the door, L., to the portrait of the Condottiere, where it rests for a moment. She holds out her hands to it, then runs across the room and out, L.]*

*[Enter, R., DONNA LUCIA escorted by GIAN carrying a casket, a box of comfits and a fan. DONNA LUCIA, fair-complexioned, with the high forehead so assiduously cultivated by the great ladies of the 'Quattrocento', gorgeous in Renaissance brocades, removes her veil, unclasps her mantle, and drops them casually upon the chest, speaking as she does.]*

DONNA LUCIA: He has gone to the tiltyard, you say?

GIAN: Yes, Madonna.

DONNA LUCIA: Set down the casket on the table. Put my fan here. (*Indicates cloak and veil*) Give me my comfit box. (*Moves to table*) Now go and tell that sullen fellow Baldassare that I am come, and that I do not wish to be disturbed—on pain of angering the Capitano! (*She opens the casket, inside the lid of which is fixed a mirror, and taking out a pot of rouge starts touching up her lips.*)

GIAN: Yes, Madonna.

DONNA LUCIA: Well, run, then. What are you gaping at? (*GIAN, overcome with embarrassment, hastens to do her bidding. During the*

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*ensuing conversation she takes out and tries on necklaces and rings of pearl, ruby, lapis lazuli and coral)* And Gian!

GIAN (*halting at the door*): Madonna?

DONNA LUCIA: Bring me a lute. I have a new canzonet to set to music.

GIAN: Shall I bring the Capitano's, Madonna? He has more than he can play.

DONNA LUCIA: How many has he?

GIAN: One—for show, Madonna!

DONNA LUCIA: You have a biting wit for one so young, my Gian! Are you a Florentine?

GIAN: Madonna! I am a Lombard and a soldier; not a watcher at keyholes or a flatterer!

DONNA LUCIA: Ah, well, time will show. But to wed Guido Torremonte's words to the great soldier's lute . . . (*Laughs*) Per Bacco e la Santa Virgine! That were a jest indeed. (*Still chuckling at the humour of the situation*) Run, Gian—fetch me the lute. And stir up Baldassare on your way.

GIAN (*kissing her hand*): I fly, Madonna.

DONNA LUCIA: That's my pretty falcon.

GIAN: I fly, Madonna, that I may soon return!

DONNA LUCIA: Hark at the child! He will soon be a man, and as full of lies as the rest! (GIAN, *deeply offended, walks with dignity to the door*) I wager you'll play 'mora' with the first page you meet!

GIAN: I am not a child, Madonna!

DONNA LUCIA: That is news indeed. (*As GIAN goes out, L., she drifts over to mirror and preens herself before it; hums a little snatch of song; discovers CARA's pillow of lace and plays with the bobbins*) I wonder where my naughty

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little Cara is—she should have met me here. Gone to the tiltyard, I wager, to watch her Capitano. (*She draws the CAPITANO's letter from her bosom and seats herself at the table with a sigh*) Ah, well! He is a great breaker of hearts. But I shall keep him dangling ere I give him mine. (*Draws a stiletto from the chatelaine at her waist and smooths out the crumpled pages. Presently re-enter GIAN with a lute.*)

GIAN: Have I been swift, Madonna?

DONNA LUCIA: Swift as a hawk, my Gian. Swift as the Capitano when he takes a town.

GIAN (*dejectedly*): It is always of the Capitano that you think?

DONNA LUCIA: I did not say so, Gian. (*She starts to tune the lute. The letter slides from her lap to the ground.*)

GIAN (*with a heavy sigh*): I can see it is.

DONNA LUCIA: Fie! Am I so feeble a dissembler?

[CARA rushes in R, hot and breathless, looks wildly round, then, shutting the heavy door behind her, runs to her mistress.]

DONNA LUCIA: Why! my naughty Cara, what game is this?

[CARA falls on her knees before her and pleads with outstretched hands.]

DONNA LUCIA (*looking down at her in pained surprise*): Well, child, what have you broken? Or is it the festival of another patron saint? (*CARA shakes her head violently and continues to supplicate*) No, Cara, go away. Can't you see how occupied I am?

[CARA's eyes fall on the badly written sheets of the letter. Picking them up off the floor she impales them upon the stiletto, then lets it drop with a little cry of horror, and, clutch-

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*ing her mistress's skirts, points to what she has done.]*

DONNA LUCIA: Cara, you're a very naughty child! What do you mean by doing that? (*Stoops to pick the letter off the floor, then as her face comes level with CARA's, realises there are tears in her eyes*) Why, what is the matter, silly one? What are you crying for?

[*CARA scrambles to her feet and looks wildly round the room. Her eyes light on GIAN. Rushing at him she drags him forward and, snatching up the stiletto, appears about to stab him, but GIAN—fearing she has gone suddenly mad—grabs her wrist and prevents her. CARA struggles to free herself, then stamping with rage bites the back of his hand.*]

GIAN (*letting go*): Bestia! (*Promptly cuffs her.*)

DONNA LUCIA (*putting a protecting arm round her protégée*): You unmannerly whelp! You shall not cuff my little Cara!

GIAN: A man cannot permit himself to be bitten!

DONNA LUCIA: Since when have we reached manhood? (*GIAN turns away in mortification. To CARA*) But listen, piccola, you must not play these violent games.

[*CARA's gaze becomes concentrated on a miniature set with pearls which DONNA LUCIA wears round her neck. She points to it and then to GIAN.*]

DONNA LUCIA (*to GIAN, anxious to humour her*): What does she want, Giannino? Can you understand?

GIAN (*swelling with pride at being called "Giannino" by his goddess*): I do not know, Excellency!

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[As they both seem puzzled, CARA calmly removes the locket and puts it over GIAN's head.]

DONNA LUCIA: Really, Carina, I cannot let you use the Capitano's portrait as a plaything. Bring it back to me at once!

[CARA shakes her head, and tries to indicate by signs that she wishes to identify GIAN with the portrait he is wearing. At last she drops him a little curtsey, and very deferentially kisses his hand.]

DONNA LUCIA: You want us to pretend he is the Capitano? (CARA nods vigorously; GIAN, beginning to enjoy the game, strikes an arrogant attitude. DONNA LUCIA laughs) Very well, what then?

[CARA turns, and fixing GIAN with an eye which dares him to spoil the game a second time, pretends to stab him. This time GIAN plays up and, collapsing with a realistic gurgle, writhes upon the floor. CARA stands over him, doing her best to look intensely ferocious. Then suddenly the stiletto slips through her fingers, and turning away with a shudder she covers her face with her hands.]

GIAN (sitting up hastily): It's all right, Carina, I'm not really dead.

[CARA turns and stamps her foot at him, then, covering her face with her hands again, shakes her head sadly.]

DONNA LUCIA (rising in horror): Carina! What do you mean? Has—has he been murdered?

[CARA looks up quickly, shakes her head—DONNA LUCIA sinks back in her chair, hand to heart—then nods it—DONNA LUCIA stiffens—then shakes it once more.]

DONNA LUCIA (really disturbed): Carina, you

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have something to tell me. Quick, what is it? Oh, if only you could speak.

[CARA runs to her, and lifts her mistress's hand to her cheek lovingly.]

DONNA LUCIA (*doing her best to help her*): He has not been murdered? (CARA shakes her head) Then someone is planning to murder him? (CARA nods harder than ever) Where? . . . when? . . .

[CARA takes another swift glance round, then picking up a taper—or a cinder from the fire with the tongs—runs round pretending to light many candles. This done, she fetches the lute, and pressing it into DONNA LUCIA'S hands makes as though to strike the opening chords of a galliard; then, turning to GIAN, curtsies deeply. GIAN, a little puzzled, bows. With pointed toe, and lifted skirt, as though waiting for the dance to start, CARA offers him her hand. He takes it. Apprehensively DONNA LUCIA plays a bar or two of a court galliard or pavane, and GIAN and CARA go through a few of the steps solemnly, then CARA halts, and, wringing her hands, looks enquiringly at DONNA LUCIA.]

DONNA LUCIA (*leaning forward*): It will be to-night? (CARA nods) At the State Ball in the Palace? (CARA nods again and holds up three fingers.)

GIAN (*catching the excitement*): At three of the clock?

[CARA shakes her head and tries again.]

DONNA LUCIA: What has three got to do with it?

[Still holding up three fingers, CARA makes the mime actor's gesture to indicate a man.]

DONNA LUCIA (*petulantly*): Three what?



FEAR NO MORE

GIAN: 'Tis the mummers' sign for a man, Madonna. (*Casting up his eyes devoutly*) Praised be the Saints for the Comedia del' Arte!

DONNA LUCIA: Yes, yes, of course—three men, you say? Three men will try to kill him—to-night—at the great Ball. But who? Which men? What are their names? (*Getting up impatiently*) Santa Madonna! I would you had a tongue. . . .

GIAN: Do you know who they are, Carina? (*CARA nods*) Can you show us what they're like?

[*After a moment's thought, CARA begins to limp about the room.*]

DONNA LUCIA (*sitting down again*): A man who limps . . . let me see. I cannot think of anyone who limps.

[*CARA suddenly straddles a chair or stool, and pretends to gallop on it, then, rolling to the floor, picks herself up and pretends she has hurt her leg.*]

DONNA LUCIA: Not . . . not the Count of Ruggiello?

GIAN: Yes, yes, Madonna! He was unhorsed at the grand tourney two days ago. . . .

DONNA LUCIA: So he was. I remember. And has been lame ever since—Carina, is it he? (*CARA nods delightedly*) Good! What of the other two? How can we tell them . . . ?

[*CARA mimics the mannerisms of the CASTELLANO DI SAN ROCCO, studying his finger-nails before he speaks, etc.*]

DONNA LUCIA: Ah! the Castellano di San Rocco. It is just so he fidgets with his hands. Is it he you mean?

FEAR NO MORE

[CARA jumps up and down clapping her hands.]

DONNA LUCIA: And now the third, Carina. Who is the third conspirator?

[CARA stands plunged in thought for a moment, then starts mimicking TORREMONTE'S walk, his bow, in vain. They cannot guess.]

DONNA LUCIA (*has an idea*): Has he a beard?

[CARA demolishes a beard.]

GIAN (*sadly*): No, he has no beard.

DONNA LUCIA: I cannot think. . . .

[Looking round desperately, CARA darts to the table and, dipping her finger in the rouge, draws a scar down her cheek bone and turns to her mistress hopefully.]

GIAN: A scar, Madonna, see, he has a scar!

DONNA LUCIA (*plaintively*): But half the free companions carry scars!

GIAN (*in almost shocked tones*): He has a scar and yet he wears no beard? Tch! Strange!

[CARA suddenly gets an idea. Rummaging in DONNA LUCIA'S jewel casket, she selects a large emerald ring which she slips on to her middle finger. Breaking off the head of a flower, she tucks it behind her ear, gazing at herself in the glass with half-closed eyes, her jewelled hand resting affectedly upon her breast.]

DONNA LUCIA (*giving a little scream of recognition*): Guido Torremonte, to the life! (*Turning to table*) Find me some parchment—Cara! where's my pen? (CARA produces both from litter on table, GIAN snatches ink-pot and holds it for her. DONNA LUCIA scribbles and sands a note) No time to seal it. See, I trust you, Gianno! Take this to the Capitano and say

## FEAR NO MORE

whatever he is doing I must see him now, or I will never look on him again. Be swift and secret if you love me, Gian! (*GIAN grabs her hand and kisses it, then dashes out. Turning to CARA, she takes her two hands*) Carina, if we save him, all Lombardy will owe a debt to you!

### CURTAIN

(*to denote the passage of a few hours*)

SCENE 2: *The same as SCENE 1, only at night. The room is lit by candelabra, and a piece of rich brocade or velvet is flung over the balustrade of the balcony, which in Italy denotes a festival. By the door, R., lounge two men-at-arms holding pikes or halberds. GIAN, bored but on duty, hovers about the room. A distant murmur of voices and muted music would help the "atmosphere". Enter THE CAPITANO, L., dressed for the Ball but wearing a sword.*

CAPITANO (*snapping his fingers to attract the attention of the guards*): Not that door, this! . . . (*Indicates one by which he entered. GUARDS change over quickly*) You will find Baldassare at your elbow. He is just round the corner with his men, should he be needed, but the less stir the better. Gian, are you ready?

GIAN (*coming to attention*): Si, Signore!

CAPITANO: Get over there, then. (*GIAN skips to the door, R.*) Once past that door, neither Ruggiello nor Torremonte must go out again.

GIAN: And how do I prevent them . . . ?

CAPITANO: Use your brains, and if they fail you— (*Taps the dagger in his belt significantly.*)

GIAN (*bowing gravely*): Comprendo!

FEAR NO MORE

[*The CAPITANO goes out on to the balcony and disappears. GIAN takes up his appointed position. Enter RUGGIELLO, R., somewhat cautiously.*]

RUGGIELLO (to GIAN): Has Messer Torremonte come yet?

GIAN: No, Messere.

RUGGIELLO: Then I will wait for him. (*An awkward silence*) Has the Galliard begun yet?

GIAN: I do not know, Messere.

RUGGIELLO (*irritably*): Then run and look and bring me word.

GIAN (*without stirring*): I am on duty here, Messere!

RUGGIELLO (*exploding*): Duty, indeed! Your duty's to obey your betters. Go! or I'll . . .  
(*Aims a blow at GIAN, who dodges it.*)

CAPITANO (*stepping into sight*): Godden to you, Ruggiello! You're late for the galliard. . . .

[*RUGGIELLO whips round to face the voice, the CAPITANO raises an eyebrow and the GUARDS close in quietly behind the COUNT.*]

RUGGIELLO (*recovering from his surprise*): Why, so it seems, Messere. But you, are you not dancing?

CAPITANO: Presently, Ruggiello, presently. (*He moves his head and the GUARDS seize the COUNT.*)

RUGGIELLO (*struggling*): If you do not unhand me I will call the guard!

CAPITANO (*raising a warning hand*): I have but to cry: "Ruggiello sought to kill your Capitano"—and in this city I have liberated you would get short shrift!

RUGGIELLO (*becoming violent*): You blood-

FEAR NO MORE

sucking, treacherous tyrant you . . . you meddler in other men's affairs!

CAPITANO (*suavely*): Gently, Ruggiello, gently! Or have you never seen the vengeance of the mob? Once in Siena . . . but you, I think, were there——

[GUARDS *proceed to bind the COUNT.*]

RUGGIELLO (*sullenly, ceasing to struggle*): What have you got against me? I have done nothing to deserve your hate.

CAPITANO: It's not what you have done, Messere, it's what you'd like to do. You'd best go quietly, or you may find yourself dancing a galliard—at the rope's end.

GIAN (*darting to door, L.*): Ho! Baldassare! Here's a guest for you. (*Stands back to let the GUARDS march the COUNT out. Turns excitedly to the Condottiere*) Now we have two, Messere!

CAPITANO: Look less elated, boy. The Florentine is like to prove more troublesome. (*As GIAN looks a little dashed, he lays a kindly if heavy hand on his shoulder*) Just as surprise is the first secret of success in war, if you can school your features till neither friend nor foe can read your mind—that is the secret of success in peace. (*Turning up stage again*) A mask-like countenance will save you many blows!

GIAN: I will be circumspect, Messere.

CAPITANO (*turning back again*): Much more than circumspect, Giannino! You must ape the Cherubim, for Torremonte is as wary as a cat. (*Goes out on to the balcony once more, and so from sight.*)

[*Enter, R., DONNA LUCIA on her way to the Ball. She halts and looks round the room anxiously.*]

FEAR NO MORE

DONNA LUCIA: The guard? Is it not set?

GIAN (*trying hard not to beam*): The trap is sprung, Madonna.

DONNA LUCIA: Have you got them all?

GIAN: We took the Castellano at his lodgings; The Count of Ruggiello has just this moment gone——

DONNA LUCIA: Escaped?

GIAN: No, no; to Baldassare's keeping!

DONNA LUCIA (*breathing again*): And Torremonte?

GIAN: On his way here now.

DONNA LUCIA: Tell me when you have taken Torremonte. It is him I fear. Be watchful, Gian. I trust my love to you!

GIAN (*ardently*): I will defend him with my life, Madonna!

DONNA LUCIA (*smiling indulgently*): You are a good lad, Gianno. You may kiss my hand.

[GIAN does so devoutly. DONNA LUCIA goes out, L., leaving GIAN gazing after her. Re-enter GUARDS and take up their positions.]

CAPITANO (*putting his head round the curtain*): Hst! (GIAN jumps and looks round) He's coming! (One GUARD crosses) Once in, bar his retreat as well as his advance, and leave the rest to me. (*He disappears again.*)

[Enter TORREMONTE, R. He walks briskly across the room, glancing casually at the lounging guards, but just as he reaches the door, L., the GUARD comes suddenly to life, and he finds his way barred by a pike.]

TORREMONTE (*in an annoyed voice, but taking care to keep just out of reach*): Stand aside, fellow! I bear a message for the Podestá. (As

## FEAR NO MORE

*the GUARD does not stir*) What? do you care so little for your skin?

GUARD (*unmoved*): We have our orders, Messer Torremonte.

TORREMONTE (*with a quick backward glance*): We? (*Sees his retreat is also barred. With a smile and a shrug*) As you will! (*Edging almost imperceptibly towards the window up centre*) I think, though, when it comes to the ears of the Podestá, you will repent that you delayed his messenger—ah! (*At the word "messenger" he had turned and leaped for the balcony, only to find the point of the CAPITANO's sword against his breast: his eyes looking into his. For a moment they remain thus, then TORREMONTE gives way a step*) What does this mean?

CAPITANO (*forestalling a movement of GUIDO's hand towards his dagger, and forcing him slowly back into the room, step by step*): It means, Messere, the murdered sometimes speak.

[*At this moment GIAN, who has crept up behind him, flings his cloak over TORREMONTE'S head, and after a brief struggle he is disarmed and bound by the GUARD.*]

TORREMONTE (*viciously, as he is hurried out, L.*): I have been betrayed. Someone shall pay for this!

[*The CAPITANO resheathes his sword. GIAN, who has come off rather badly in the scrimmage, is ruefully adjusting a torn jerkin, when DONNA LUCIA appears in the doorway, L., and looks apprehensively round. Realising all is well, she crosses swiftly to the CAPITANO.*]

DONNA LUCIA: Amore!

CAPITANO (*taking her in his arms*): Bella Donna!

DONNA LUCIA (*clinging to him*): And are you safe?

## FEAR NO MORE

CAPITANO: As safe as I am ever like to be this side the grave.

DONNA LUCIA: Ah! but I have died a hundred times to-night, fearing for you.

CAPITANO: Then do I doubly live, knowing you love! (*They kiss ecstatically*) But, Donna mia, why did you keep me waiting seven days—each day a century—to tell me this?

DONNA LUCIA: I did not know my heart until to-night.

CAPITANO: Then am I deep in debt to these conspirators. I would that every risk I ran could bring me such reward! But tell me, Sweet, how did you come to know about the plot?

DONNA LUCIA: It was Carina told it me; she overheard their plans. . . .

CAPITANO: Carina? But she cannot speak.

DONNA LUCIA: Nevertheless, she told me.

CAPITANO: Per Bacco! How?

DONNA LUCIA: She acted each of them in turn, till Gian and I guessed who they were. It was the best mumming I have seen since the Duke's troupe were here.

CAPITANO: I have it—Donna mia!

DONNA LUCIA (*startled*): Have what—amore?

CAPITANO: Why should we not found a troupe of mummers that shall outshine the Duke's?

DONNA LUCIA (*thrilled*): Or rival Naples!

CAPITANO: There is a Neapolitan in my Company plays Punchinello till the tears run down the furrowed cheeks of my rough fellows. He shall be maestro, Cara prima donna.

DONNA LUCIA: And you will give it me, this troupe of mummers, to keep my thoughts from grief when you are at the wars?



FEAR NO MORE

CAPITANO: It shall be called "Lucia's Company"!

DONNA LUCIA (*suddenly noticing GIAN*): And Gian here, we were forgetting him. Although you owe your life to Cara, he too did his share.

CAPITANO (*as enthusiastic as a child with a new toy*): And Gianno shall be Harlequin—oho! . . . the light, fantastic toe—the mask—the wand. . . . (*Dances a few steps*) I always wished I'd been a Harlequin. . . .

GIAN (*stubbornly*): I do not want to be a mummer, I'd rather fight than mime.

CAPITANO (*not too pleased at this check to his exuberance*): So that's your tune, my little fighting-cock. Well, if you'd rather ply the dagger than the wand, we'll have to see what can be done. (*Inspired by an entrancing smile from DONNA LUCIA*) How would you like to be a squire?

DONNA LUCIA (*holding out her hand to GIAN*): Make him my squire.

[GIAN kisses her hand delightedly.]

CAPITANO: Per Bacco, no! There are enough flies at my honey-pot. If he will not dance, then he shall to the wars with me, and learn to handle men. (CARA appears in the doorway, R., and stands watching them gravely) Oho! Whom have we here? My little rescuer. Come here, my Columbine! (*He holds out his arms. CARA flies into them, then bursts into tears*) Corpo di Bacco! Since Torremonte did not kill me, must you now drown me? (*CARA begins to laugh through her tears*) That's better, my bimba! Sunshine after rain— Well, little maid, it seems I owe my life to you. (*Her arms go round his neck in an ecstatic hug*) Sacramento! now she's strangling me. . . . (*CARA goes off into peals of laughter, and the CAPITANO*

FEAR NO MORE

*unlocks her arms from round his neck and sets her down*) Listen, Carina, you are going to become great and famous. You are going to learn to dance and sing . . . (*CARA turns a woe-begone face to him and shakes her head*) No, no, of course, you cannot sing—but you can act. They tell me you can act like the very devil—I mean, like an archangel! How would you like to act before the Duke?

DONNA LUCIA: Or the King of Naples?

GIAN (*not to be outdone*): Or the Emperor?

[*CARA looks at each in turn, then shakes her head and looks back at the CAPITANO.*]

CAPITANO: What speaking eyes she has! What is it you would say?

[*CARA flashes an appealing glance at GIAN, then turns and looks again at the CAPITANO.*]

GIAN: I think she means she'd rather act for you, Messere, than anyone in the world.

CAPITANO (*touched*): Is that it, Carina?

[*CARA nods gravely.*]

DONNA LUCIA (*half laughing, half annoyed*): Cara will bewitch you if I'm not careful!

CAPITANO: Dio! what eyes! Carina, if you look like that at everyone . . . (*At this point DONNA LUCIA puts her arms round GIAN and kisses him tenderly*) Santa Madonna! Will you stop kissing Gian! (*GIAN, in the seventh heaven, waxes bold and kisses her back*) Hola! Enough, or I'll reduce you to the ranks, my lusty squire.

[*He draws DONNA LUCIA to him, still holding CARA by the hand.*]

DONNA LUCIA: Now run away, Carina mia. Tomorrow we will discuss the plans for the new troupe. How would you like to play in the Comedia del' Arte? (*CARA turns an enquiring glance to the CAPITANO*) Yes, yes, he wishes it.

## FEAR NO MORE

CAPITANO: Of course I wish it. It is my plan! (*CARA appears to accept this as final. He bends down to her*) And when you are famous, you will let me kiss your hand? (*She touches his cheek timidly with her finger-tips. He goes down on one knee and solemnly kisses her hand*) I salute my rescuer!

DONNA LUCIA: Come, it is time we went. The feast will have begun, and everyone will wonder where you are.

CAPITANO (*drawing DONNA LUCIA to him and quoting merrily*):

“Morn, noon or night, where should a  
gallant be  
But gazing on the Pearl of Lombardy?”

[*They go out together L., murmuring sweet nothings after the fashion of lovers. GIAN, left alone with CARA, sighs heavily.*]

GIAN: It's all very well for them! They send me to the wars and you to the Comedia—it's banishment for both. (*CARA has not yet quite come down to earth*) Oh, yes, I know he kissed your hand, but I'd want more than that; but then—I am a man. (*Swaggers to the door, then turns and bows ironically*) Godden, Madonna Cara!

[*Goes out.*]

[*Left alone, CARA turns and goes slowly up stage to the window. Just as she reaches it, a masked man appears upon the balcony. There is something familiar about him. CARA steps back with a stifled scream.*]

TORREMONTE (*unmasking and stepping into the room*): Softly, my child. You did not think to see me quite so soon? (*Going quickly to the door*) Ah, well! the Podestá should spend more money on repairs if he would keep his prisoners caged! There . . . we will close the doors—

## FEAR NO MORE

though it's not likely anyone will come. They're busy feasting now, so we'll have time to talk. (CARA retreats towards the window) Fetch me that hanging from the balcony. (Impelled by his mesmeric gaze, CARA obeys. He turns to the chest) A cloak . . . a veil . . . a fan. . . . How careless women are! (Takes the heavy brocade from CARA) This for a kirtle . . . see, I am well equipped to get away. (CARA regards him warily) Yes, they disarmed me, but I was not born yesterday! (Draws a stiletto from his boot and throws it on the table. CARA shrinks back) So, it was you gave us away. You were not so half-witted as we thought. You act like an 'archangel'. . . . Come, let me see a sample of your skill. If it is good enough—and Torremonte's no mean judge—then I may let you live. (While talking, he has been rapidly changing his appearance with the help of the oddments he has collected. CARA begins to grope for the door. Snatching up the stiletto, he gets below her, ready to intercept an escape by either door) No, up stage, if you please! (CARA obeys) Your exit is not yet. Now hold those candles while I fix the veil. . . . (He turns to table, spies casket, opens it) Per Bacco! Rouge! (Bends over casket) The Gods are kind! (To CARA, still clutching candlestick) Come closer with the light. (He effects a quick make-up, studying his face in the little mirror) Hm! A good thing I was shaved to-day! (Stands back to admire himself, one hand on his breast, in the pose CARA had mimicked) Behold me now—the Pearl of Lombardy! (Observing that her gaze is fixed on his heavy ring) You're right—the ring is wrong. (CARA's face falls as he takes it off and drops it into the casket) The ring would give the show away. (Snatching up a bracelet instead he thrusts it on) Details are important—every mummer knows. (He draws the veil across his face and turns to CARA) Now for our

## FEAR NO MORE

act—this monologue à deux! Pick up the casket and the fan and walk beside me. Lucia leaves the ball . . . (*Starts to walk with a billowing movement*) Seeing you with me the guards will not look close. (*In a high falsetto*) 'Amore mio! Are you safe?' (*Sniggers at his own cleverness, then checks himself and turns to see why CARA is not following. Harshly*): Well? (*CARA shakes her head slowly*) The voice was wrong? True, you are an artist! I'll pitch it lower. Or better still not speak. If you play well I shall not need to speak. Come, the curtain's up! (*As she does not move*) You will not? (*Feels for his dagger*) Why, any man but I would kill you and have done, but Guido Torremonte has a soul for Art. . . . (*Still CARA does not stir*) Do as I say and quickly! (*CARA looks frantically round the room. TORREMONTE puts back his dagger and tries a different tack*) You'll not regret it if you come with me. Talent is scarce, and fools are plentiful. What does that loud-voiced bully know of mumming? He's but a dancing bear. But I could make you famous. (*Losing his temper*) Per Bacco! Will you come? (*Rigid with terror, CARA still faintly shakes her head. He rushes at her. Regaining her power of movement, CARA hurls the casket at him and makes for the window, but before she gets there he stabs her in the back, and she falls at his feet. He stands for a moment looking down at her. He stirs her with his foot. She makes no sound*) Tch! Pity! After all, she was a fool. . . . (*He replaces his dagger, and crossing swiftly to the door R. goes out*)

[*After a few seconds' silence, a GUARD enters R., hesitatingly, looking back several times. Almost at once, another GUARD bursts in from L. Seeing the first, he shouts:*]

SECOND GUARD: The Florentine!

FIRST GUARD (*turning*): What of him?

FEAR NO MORE

SECOND GUARD: He's escaped!

FIRST GUARD: How could he—from the tower?

SECOND GUARD: Wrenched out one of the window bars and climbed down. He's gone all right. . . .

FIRST GUARD: Holy smoke!

SECOND GUARD: . . . And Baldassare's shaking in his shoes. Have you seen anyone you can't account for?

FIRST GUARD: I saw a woman sneaking down the stairs. I thought it was the Capitano's lady—

SECOND GUARD: Was she attended?

FIRST GUARD: No, she was alone. It made me wonder. Not even her little maid . . .

*[A sigh and a faint movement from the curtains by the balcony.]*

SECOND GUARD (*whipping round*): What's that? (*Strides to window*) Why—it's the little maid!

FIRST GUARD: Queer place to fall asleep!

SECOND GUARD: Asleep? She'll not wake this side Purgatory. Look at her—

FIRST GUARD: Mother of Heaven! The poor innocent! But who . . . ?

SECOND GUARD: The Florentine! This is his work. That woman who passed you on the stair . . . it's him, the slippery swine! After her for your life, man! (*Exit FIRST GUARD. SECOND GUARD rushes on to the balcony—peers out R.—waves excitedly*) Ho, there! Stop that woman! Take care . . . she's got a knife. . . . Good! Hold on to her—I'm coming!

*[Turns back into the room just as the CAPITANO, with DONNA LUCIA on his arm, appears in the doorway L.]*

## FEAR NO MORE

CAPITANO: What's all this noise?

DONNA LUCIA (*fearing a trap, clutches his arm to hold him back*): Amore!

SECOND GUARD (*halting*): The Florentine, Excellency, he escaped . . . dressed as a woman—  
(*A violent movement from the CAPITANO*) But they've stopped him at the gate. . . .

CAPITANO (*a volcano about to erupt*): Go and make sure. (SECOND GUARD, *glad to escape, salutes and hurries out R.* The CAPITANO, *detaching himself from DONNA LUCIA, goes quickly to the balcony, looking out R. as GUARD has done, then calls over his shoulder to LUCIA*) They've got him!

[*Turning back into the room, his eyes light on CARA. He halts suspiciously. As his quick eyes take in the details of the crime, fear gives place to rage. He stoops and touches her, then looks across at DONNA LUCIA, who stands transfixed with horror by the further door. His face grows soft . . . admiration mingles with regret. Slowly he removes his cap, and, kneeling by the little body, makes the sign of the Cross.*]

## CURTAIN

# FAREWELL, EMMA

by

JAMES LANSDALE HODSON

Mr. Hodson is the author of several full-length and one-act plays, among the former *Red Night* and *Harvest in the North*.

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## **CHARACTERS**

**NELSON**

**CAPTAIN BLACKWOOD**

**EMMA HAMILTON**

## FAREWELL, EMMA

SCENE: *A room in Nelson's house at Merton.*

TIME: *5 o'clock on a late September morning in 1805.*

*The curtain will fall during the play and rise on the same Scene late at night of that day.*

*It is NELSON's home and that of LADY HAMILTON and of their small daughter, Horatia, a child of five, whom we do not see.*

*NELSON has been home for three weeks living quietly and fairly happily with EMMA and his child while he awaits his summons back to the Fleet. He is, however, conscious of London Society's criticism of him and of the fact that his domestic affairs are not regular or likely to become so.*

*The house is full of pictures of him, of trophies, medallions and so forth. EMMA is extremely flamboyant and he grows a little weary of it. Perhaps he knows in his bones that when next he leaves for the sea, he will not return. At all events, this last parting between him and EMMA is touched with foreboding. He is forty-six and old for his years, and EMMA has grown fat, slightly blowsy and a trifle vulgar.*

*The room bears the signs of an overnight party—glasses are about and chairs disarranged. The air is stale.*

*NELSON enters without his jacket, his hair powdered, his face sallow and thin. He sur-*

## FAREWELL, EMMA

veys the room with distaste. He opens the window and then looks at the many pictures of himself and the medallions and decorations on the walls. He doesn't like it much; overdone. He clears his own small table and has begun to examine a chart when there is a loud knocking at the front door. NELSON starts, rises, and goes at once.

Bolts can be heard being drawn and NELSON returns, followed by Captain HENRY BLACKWOOD, of the frigate "*Euryalus*". He is on his way to London with news for the Admiralty of the French and Spanish fleets having united and left Cadiz.

BLACKWOOD is a fat-faced, handsome little man with side-whiskers; talks in jerks.

BLACKWOOD: Sorry, my lord, knocked so loud. Thought you'd all be in bed. Barely five o'clock.

NELSON: Yes, yes. My bad habits. Those three o'clock breakfasts of mine. (*He nods towards the door behind them*) Perhaps they'll go to sleep again. We'll hope so. (*Pauses*) Well, Blackwood, you've come to tell me the Fleets are out?

BLACKWOOD: Villeneuve has left Cadiz, sir.

NELSON (*making a sharp exclamation*): Ha! I knew it! The instant I saw your face. You are on your way to the Admiralty?

BLACKWOOD: Yes, sir.

NELSON (*incisively*): You will inform Lord Barham I shall be with him before noon.

BLACKWOOD (*inclining his head*): Sir.

NELSON (*harshly*): The French and the Dons eh? At last they imagine they are strong enough.

BLACKWOOD: Find they're not, sir.

FAREWELL, EMMA

NELSON (*lifting his face, suddenly*): You never know, Blackwood. The God of battles is inscrutable. What is it? . . . "Take from them now the sense of reckoning, lest the opposing numbers pluck their hearts from them . . ." (*He smiles*) Sailors are no mathematicians.

BLACKWOOD: May I—ask favour, sir?

NELSON: Well?

BLACKWOOD: That my frigate *Euryalus* shall sail with you, sir.

NELSON (*banteringly*): You're sure I'm going, then?

BLACKWOOD: There's no one else, my lord.

NELSON: Come, a courtier's words.

BLACKWOOD: Mr. Pitt's, sir. A week ago. Talking to Lord Barham. They were sending me to Portsmouth. Couldn't help overhearing. Mr. Pitt said: "No question of choice if they come out. That part is simple. Must be Lord Nelson."

NELSON: And Barham?

BLACKWOOD: Acquiesced—with vigour, sir.

NELSON (*paces in deep reflection*): No one else, eh? (*With an amused smile*) Did they say I was a genius?

BLACKWOOD: Everybody knows you are, sir.

NELSON (*glad of the opportunity to talk to an old friend*): Tut! tut! Genius, Blackwood, is a matter of foresight. If you take as much care as I do, and act with as much decision, you will be a genius also. What happens before a battle? I plan for every possible emergency. If the enemy does such-and-such, if the wind be so or so, if we be on this tack or that—it is provided for. I leave nothing to chance. Strike with your heaviest blow where the enemy is

## FAREWELL, EMMA

weakest—that is all. It is said I prefer to fight against superior numbers. Nonsense! I will fight whether they be superior or not, if it is necessary, but (*with a smile*) I prefer two ships to his one and, since I have never had that, I create two to one by using an overwhelming force on a small portion of his line. (*Suddenly remembering EMMA and the child*) Um! Mustn't talk so loud.

BLACKWOOD (*in a loud whisper*): Most commanders know the theory, sir, but they can't carry it out.

NELSON (*going close to him*): There's fortune in it—a kind of luck—the fortune that comes with long striving. A man's opportunity arrives, Blackwood, if he works for it long enough and acts quickly when it comes (*he walks about again*). And perhaps this is my opportunity to put an end once for all to Bonaparte's thoughts of invading us—that braggart, usurper and fouler of king's palaces. Would to God he were an admiral and I could deal with him!

BLACKWOOD: Too cunning for that, my lord. Knows we should be bound to win—our guns firing three shots to their one, as they do.

NELSON (*forgetting himself and talking louder again*): Come, Blackwood, it's not so easy as that. We may have the best gunners but I'm not sure we have the best ships. Half of our old hulks are likely to roll their masts out in heavy weather—our best we've captured from the French or the Spanish—that's a fine thing, isn't it? A confounded Irishman went to Barcelona and built them the best vessels in the world. Irish! Never forgiven us for Cromwell, I suppose.

BLACKWOOD: Ships—not everything, sir—our men—with you to lead them—invincible.

NELSON: Ah! You think so, eh? Certainly I ask nothing better than a squad of Norfolk men at my back. A bit slow, but tough as oak. And by God! they need to be, they need to be! When we sail, Blackwood, how many do you suppose will be volunteers, and how many pressed men?

BLACKWOOD: About half-and-half, sir.

NELSON: We shall be fortunate if they are. Three pressed men to one volunteer, most like. And why? Is patriotism confined to such as you and me, Blackwood? No, or it wouldn't be were the men paid well enough and treated in proper fashion. Defrauded of their rations, bilked of their prize money, short of food till roast rats are a delicacy—damn it! even you and I have eaten them as midshipmen! Hush! We mustn't talk so loud or we shall keep them awake.

BLACKWOOD (*in a loud whisper*): And weevil biscuits that'll walk about and answer back, sir.

NELSON (*comes to him as though in confidence*): I once went into it at Portsmouth—I found ten thousand pieces of beef missing over a period, and a quarter of a million pounds of bread short; and ships' pursers and clerks increasing their wages tenfold by cheating, bribes and jiggery-pokery generally. No wonder we can't get men for the Fleet and have to rake the sewers for them—jailbirds and cut-throats. And that leads to cruel handling of men—this flogging through the Fleet, for example.

[*His voice has gradually risen again.*]

BLACKWOOD: Flogging's the only thing that some of 'em fear, sir.

NELSON: I know. But let a man be flogged on his own ship and nowhere else—and never flog him till he's insensible and all the manhood in

him destroyed. I never knew a man flogged through the Fleet who was any good afterwards. High spirits and good health—those are what matter. I once kept the seas for nearly two years—never set a foot ashore—and barely a man in the sick bay—my onions, lemons and vegetables saw to that. Men can be born under a gun and washed in the sea and fed on tar and brimstone, but keep 'em short of vegetables and they'll be no more use than toothless old men when the day comes, because they'll all be down with scurvy. (*Whimsically*) I'm remembered for what I did at the Nile and Copenhagen and St. Vincent. They should remember me for teaching the importance of onions and vegetables and a ship's concert. (*He smiles*) Eh, Blackwood, eh? Another thing—never refuse to listen to a grievance, Blackwood, and listen before the men grow insubordinate. Love your men—don't fear them; love them—with food and songs and with a rope's end, too, if need be. But don't expect them to work for nothing except love of the Lord or of England while you're growing fat and lining your own pocket for love of yourself.

But how long it takes officers—and the Admiralty—to learn it! The Navy keeps England secure, but until the men mutinied at Spithead seven years ago they got only two-thirds of a soldier's pay. Remember this, Blackwood—a discontented seaman is like a sail with a hole in it. As for these naval captains who can't write their names, and others who make their ships a floating hell with vicious punishments, foul quarters and food that marooned men wouldn't touch—they should be jettisoned as readily as diseased pork.

The British Navy is a miracle, Blackwood, a miracle of fine men triumphing over poor ships, mismanagement and chicanery. (*Dryly*) The only greater miracle is the republican French

FAREWELL, EMMA

Navy with its ships manned not by sailors, but by soldiers, and its men hobnobbing with the commander and calling him "Comrade".

BLACKWOOD (*in genuine admiration*): If only you could be First Lord for a while, sir, when you've beaten the French—stir Whitehall up, sir.

NELSON: No; it's been in my mind—but it won't happen. One grows used to command and not to argument. Committees—backstairs lobbying—playing off one man against another—it isn't for me. Besides, I'm getting old—we age fast, those of us who've trod a deck since we were lads of ten or twelve. Perhaps that's too young an age to serve the sea. I've wondered sometimes. But whether or not, we grow fit for little else. At sea we pine for the land and a steady floor—and here (*he looks round*) one begins to want a lively deck and the sense of endless, unceasing activity that a ship brings. At sea I used to sleep no more than two hours at a time—and now I'm up half the night in consequence. I used to crave for rest—and when I've had it for a while, nothing but restlessness stills my spirit. I drilled some of the villagers yesterday (*smiles*)—they want to be ready for the invasion.

BLACKWOOD: The country is alive with men, sir—marching, firing off old rifles, sharpening scythes. Bony will have a rare reception if he comes, sir.

NELSON: We'll try and see he doesn't come. Once his fleet is destroyed . . . (*He paces to and fro. Then, suddenly*) There's a Mr. Peddeson in Brewer Street—has a coffin of mine. Give him my respects, Blackwood, and make sure he's keeping it in good order—oil and varnish.

BLACKWOOD: Coffin, sir?



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NELSON: Yes. We shall all need one some day, man. And who knows when? Came from the Nile. Halliwell of the *Swiftsure* presented it to me. Made from the mast of the French flagship *L'Orient*. I've developed quite an affection for it.

BLACKWOOD: I pray God, sir, it will be long before you need it.

NELSON: I shall finish my task. I believe that. But when the summons comes, I must answer it. So—don't forget the coffin. I like to think my remains will be well housed. And I've no great wish to be washed about by the tides, either. (*With grim humour*) They've made me seasick too often. Let me have stillness at last.

BLACKWOOD: I trust Lady Hamilton will not curse me for bringing the summons, sir.

NELSON: No, no. She knows well enough. Ah! you should have seen her on the old *Vanguard* when we took the King of Naples and his family to Palermo. By God! you'd have thought the very elements were fighting us. The roughest weather I ever saw—fore-topmast smashed like matchwood and sails torn in pieces. King, Queen and all the servants down with sickness—that and fear. But Emma—a miracle of steadfastness. Like a rock. (*Pause*) The young Prince died in her arms.

BLACKWOOD: Everyone knows, sir, what services she rendered.

NELSON: I'm afraid they don't—and don't want to. You and I know, Blackwood, that it was through her I was able to re-victual our ships at Syracuse on the way to Aboukir Bay and thus make the Nile possible. I have told their lordships so—but do they accept my word? No. By God! Blackwood . . . (*calms himself*) How-

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ever, now when I am going out again, perhaps they will listen to me.

[LADY HAMILTON *enters, wearing a dressing-jacket over her nightdress. She has, clearly, been very beautiful, but is now, at forty-one, fat and untidy, a little blowsy and with sleep in her eyes. She is in remarkable contrast to NELSON.*]

NELSON (*without waiting for her to speak*): Villeneuve is out, Emma.

[EMMA *seats herself.*]

EMMA: I thought that must be it. (*Yawns*) Aren't you—(*turning to CAPTAIN BLACKWOOD*)—Captain Johnson—

BLACKWOOD: Blackwood, madam.

NELSON: He will go with me, his ship one of my eyes of the Fleet.

EMMA: When must it be?

NELSON: So soon as the *Victory* is ready for sea. I shall visit Barham this morning. (*Pause*) At last, Emma, the enemy fleets are off Cadiz.

EMMA (*snitching her nose*): They'll probably run home again as soon as they know you're coming. (*Grumbling*) Is no one else capable of fighting but you, Horace? You've only been home a fortnight.

NELSON: Twenty-four days, Emma. (*Tenderly*) I've counted every one.

EMMA (*unappeased*): Fourteen or twenty-four, what does it matter? Are you England's only admiral? Where's that Keith got to who used to try and order you about—or the precious Hyde Parker?

NELSON (*a little sternly*): It is my duty, Emma.

FAREWELL, EMMA

EMMA: I don't think you're fit to go. You left an eye at Corsica, an arm at Teneriffe, another wound at the Nile——

NELSON: So long as these legs will bear me and my spirit sustain me, I must be ready.

EMMA (*half-yawning and speaking through it*): Well, if you must, you must, I suppose. Don't imagine I don't know that you're better at beating the French than all the other admirals put together. But then (*dryly*) I don't suppose they get up at the hours you do to study your charts—keeping the dawn watch at home. Do other admirals do it, Captain Blackwood?

BLACKWOOD: My lord is like nobody else, madam.

EMMA (*to NELSON*): How do you know they won't run into harbour and keep you waiting *another* two years?

[*She leans her cheek on her hand and sits regarding them and rubs her nose.*]

NELSON (*gently*): It is the first time, my dear, that they have joined forces and sailed out. Why, if not to face me? And they must be destroyed—that, or Bonaparte will be fighting on English soil within a month. They say his army waiting at Boulogne is nine miles long.

EMMA: Oh, you'll destroy them right enough, if they give you the chance. But if they don't fight you within three months I think Lord Barham ought to relieve you. Or let somebody else do the waiting and send for you when they're ready—let somebody else be the midwife and you be the doctor.

NELSON: Cadiz isn't Gravesend, Emma, nor the French and Dons willing to fix a day like arranging a prize fight. They may, after all, have to be tricked into fighting. (*A child is heard crying upstairs*) There's Horatia, dear.

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[*He makes an involuntary movement to go.*]

EMMA (*calmly*): She'll take no harm. I'm going in a jiffy.

NELSON: Better not tell her—not yet. I will tell her myself—later on.

EMMA (*quietly*): I've taught her to realise you can't be with us always. (*She rises. To BLACKWOOD*) You will stay for breakfast?

BLACKWOOD: Your ladyship is kind, but—news for the Admiralty.

EMMA (*with a touch of theatricalism*): Good fortune go with you.

[*Exit EMMA, stopping to sneeze violently.*]

NELSON (*briskly to BLACKWOOD*): You will present my compliments to Lord Barham and inform him I will bring with me the list of ships and officers I would prefer, in accordance with his request of a week ago. (*Smiles*) Yes, yes, we have been preparing. And you will acquaint Captain Hardy of my joining the *Victory* to-night. Hardy knows my wishes regarding officers and crew. Neither he nor I expected our holiday to be a long one.

BLACKWOOD: You always foresaw what lay ahead, sir. I remember you leaving the line at St. Vincent—without orders, sir, and doubling the victory by your action.

NELSON: Yes. It had to be done. I've often wondered what would have happened to me had I failed. Broken, I suppose. Digging potatoes now in Norfolk, perhaps. (*More eagerly*) Curious, Blackwood, that I should have been examining the chart when you came. (*Goes to it*) See, here is Cadiz. If Villeneuve should make in this direction—towards Toulon—and I intercept him here—somewhere in the neighbourhood of Cape Trafalgar—and we

## FAREWELL, EMMA

attack in two lines—two spears to cut the twisting snake. Severed in three parts, chaos in their fleet must follow. No snake is any good in three parts, Blackwood, eh?

BLACKWOOD: I hope I may have my share in it, sir?

NELSON: Your frigates will be the eyes of the Fleet, Blackwood—of supreme importance. I told their lordships after the Nile that if I had had frigates enough not a ship would have escaped us. Courage, audacity, surprise—those are the necessities. The men have the first, I try to supply the second, and third—just a touch.

BLACKWOOD: The “Nelson” touch, sir. (*The sound of LADY HAMILTON singing a lullaby comes to them. A look of grieving comes into NELSON’S face: after a long pause*) If there is nothing else, sir. . .

NELSON: Better take a glass of wine.

BLACKWOOD: Sorry, my lord; don’t take it.

NELSON: Stupid of me to forget. Coffee?

BLACKWOOD: Thank you, sir, but . . .

NELSON: Tut! tut! I make myself a cup sometimes in the early hours—we don’t allow the kitchen-fire to go out. Come along—you shall help—don’t make a noise.

[*With something of the air of a boyish conspirator, NELSON leads BLACKWOOD off as*

## THE CURTAIN FALLS

[*The CURTAIN rises immediately on the same Scene. It is 10.30 on the night of the same day.*

## FAREWELL, EMMA

*The room is now neat and tidy. NELSON's coach waits at the door.*

EMMA stands alone on the stage, richly dressed and wearing a shawl embroidered with gold anchors. She stands composed, watching the door. After a moment NELSON enters very quietly.

He is in naval uniform but without most of his decorations. His cloak and hat and sword are on the table. In a sense, NELSON is not sorry to be going; if it were not for HORATIA it would be comparatively easy. Nevertheless from time to time a wave of the old tenderness comes over him. EMMA, afraid that if he does not return, her life will be over, is very anxious; anxious, too, as to her financial position.]

EMMA: Is she asleep?

NELSON (*softly*): Yes. She lies so still I could have thought for a moment she is dead. She is flushed from crying and her lashes are still wet. (*A pause*) She's very lovely (*turning to EMMA with a look of tenderness*)—as lovely as her mother was.

EMMA: Was?

NELSON (*quickly, and touching her hand*): As you must have been as a child.

EMMA: I know—I'm sorry. I'm on edge at your going. (*Pause*) Was she brave when you told her this afternoon?

NELSON: Yes. I had thought of deceiving her—saying I was going to London for a while. I couldn't do it. (*Pause*) We were so long in the garden because she made me go round saying good-bye to the dog and the new calf and the chickens. She has made going more difficult than I had imagined. (*Smiling sadly*) Two swords in my heart, now, instead of one.

FAREWELL, EMMA!

EMMA: But two hearts to pray to God to bring you back. (*Suddenly intense*) Dear, you are coming back, aren't you?

NELSON (*solemnly*): If God wills it so.

EMMA: It may rest in your hands as much as His. You will not be reckless in face of danger?

NELSON: I may be called on to be reckless. It is a question of example. As a lieutenant, one leads the boarders. As an admiral, must one be less ready to challenge what lies ahead? I think not.

EMMA: Nelson will never be less than brave; he should not expose himself wantonly. Who will win England's battles if he is gone?

NELSON: A man's life is measured out. When the end is come, there is nothing to do but meet it. I believe I shall live till my task is done.

EMMA: It is I who am made afraid now. I do beseech you, think of me and of our daughter.

NELSON: You will never be out of my thoughts.

EMMA: You will forget us when the battle is imminent, when your head is full of plans. (*NELSON is silent*) Will you not? And when the bombardment begins?

NELSON (*low and grave*): It is better so. One commends one's dear ones and oneself to Him who made us—and gets on with the work. There's no other way. (*There is a pause. NELSON approaches EMMA to kiss her good-bye*) Good-bye, my love.

[EMMA, who has been standing near a chair at a round table, sits down and bows her head on her arm. NELSON is left standing there, uncomfortable and eager to be off. He strokes her hair.]

FAREWELL, EMMA

NELSON: Come, darling, come, my brave Emma.

EMMA (*lifting her head and with eyes that are wet*): If you are killed, what will become of us? You know how slighted I have been. Without you I shall be trampled underfoot. I have gone through the same thing in my life before. I wasn't always Lady Hamilton, you know.

NELSON (*with intensity*): They would not dare!

EMMA: I foresee it. Oh, I know the strain you have been under. You have not been happy of late. I have thought you would be glad to go away again.

NELSON (*moved*): No, no.

EMMA: Had your victories been less great, or had the people idolised you less, they would have scorned you, their precious lordships at Whitehall and St. James's. And their ladies even more. We have affronted them, we have done what so many of them would do and have lacked the courage to do—and they hate us for it, and they will be revenged. You will see.

NELSON (*persuasively*): Listen, my love. I shall leave my will naming you and Horatia as my heirs, and I shall leave letters addressed to Lord Barham and to my fellow-countrymen also. I shall bequeath you as a charge to them. (*Proudly*) Nelson is still Nelson. They will not fail to respect my wishes.

EMMA (*shocked*): You have thought it all out?

NELSON: Yes. One must think things out—

EMMA: Then you do not expect to return?

NELSON (*steadily*): I feel no different from what I have always felt. I have always gone into battle calm as to my own personal fate, exalted to be doing the task my country has



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given me. It will be the same now. I am not afraid in any sense.

EMMA: But I—I am afraid.

NELSON: No, no. You are agitated. It is natural. Think, my Emma, of how I have had to leave you before, when I went to Copenhagen, when I set off for the last weary voyage. But I have always returned.

EMMA (*rising and taking command of herself*): Yes, I know. I will do my part.

NELSON: There, I knew it. Now I am proud of you. Were there more Emmas, there would be more Nelsons. Good-bye, my dear one.

EMMA (*her head on his shoulder*): You love me still?

NELSON (*firmly*): I love you, Emma.

[*He kisses her on the lips.*]

EMMA (*in a rush of words*): I've not been worthy of you. I've scolded too much. I've been too proud of your victories and honours, loved them too much and you too little.

NELSON (*who knows this to be true*): Nonsense, Emma, nonsense. (*Strokes her hair.*)

EMMA: You have been happy with me?

NELSON: Very happy.

EMMA: Always very happy?

NELSON (*gently*): My dearest, no one is always very happy. Happier than anyone else could have made me.

EMMA (*releasing herself*): You will remember the letters?

NELSON: I will remember. Be of good courage.

[*EMMA takes his hand and presses it to her heart.*]

FAREWELL, EMMA

EMMA: God keep you, my love.

NELSON: And you—and Horatia.

*[She puts his cloak about him and he takes his hat under his arm and his sword in his hand.]*

EMMA: The flask and the sandwiches and the rug are in the coach.

NELSON: I will write from Portsmouth. God bless you, Emma, and our daughter.

*[He kisses her, then walks to the door, turns and looks at her.]*

EMMA: God send you back to us, my lord!

NELSON: Amen, my love.

*[NELSON goes. She goes to the window and draws back the curtain. The start of the coach is heard. As EMMA waves,*

CURTAIN



# TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

by

W. ERIC HARRIS

This play won the Bessborough Trophy and the Sir Barry Jackson Trophy at the Dominion Festival of 1936. The author is a Canadian, graduate of Toronto University.

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## CHARACTERS

MAGGIE FISHER, *Bill's wife*

MRS. KATE SWANSON, *a neighbour*

BILL FISHER, *a good workman*

GERTIE FISHER, *his daughter*

BENNIE FISHER, *his son*

A POLICEMAN

*(The value of twenty-five cents in English currency is one shilling.)*

## TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

SCENE: *The living-room of a workman's cottage. Somehow it gives a general effect of dejection, as if it, too, had suffered from the depression, and has only vague memories of the prosperity of the years long gone by. The checked red and white tablecloth is frayed and somewhat yellowed from long use. On the wall is an old pennant of "Niagara Falls" which has slipped from its original place and hangs by one tack. The plant in the centre of the table is half dead, withered probably from want of water, and from the forgetfulness of those who once tended it. The whole room proclaims itself to be a bit down at the heel. It has finally abandoned its old-time attempt to keep up appearances at all costs.*

*After the rise of the Curtain MAGGIE FISHER comes in from the kitchen on the right with some dishes in her hand, and proceeds to set the table for lunch for four, obtaining cutlery and other material from the buffet within the room. She is a spiritless, somewhat drab woman of about thirty-five or forty years of age, who, under other surroundings, and with happier experiences, might have been charming and attractive. Now, routine, and the very habit of living, are the main-springs of her actions. Life has been just a bit too much for her. After a quick glance at the table to see if the setting is complete, MAGGIE picks a small flower vase off the buffet and carries it to the table. Out of it she pours some coins and begins to count.*

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

MAGGIE: Five . . . ten . . . fifteen . . . sixteen . . . seventeen . . . eighteen . . . nineteen . . . twenty . . . twenty-one . . . twenty-two . . . only twenty-two cents. . . .

*[She looks at the total disconsolately. The door-bell rings three times. MAGGIE gives a gesture of irritation, quickly puts the coins back, and replaces the vase. Then she goes to answer the bell. The front door is off stage at the left, and from off stage come the greetings.]*

MAGGIE: Oh! hello, Kate.

MRS. SWANSON: Hello, Maggie.

MAGGIE: Come along in.

MRS. SWANSON: I won't take a minute, Maggie. I just wanted to show you somethin'.

*[MRS. SWANSON bustles in followed by MAGGIE. She is a neighbour who has had the good fortune to be living off a pension. Her husband was killed in the War, and now, in the days of depression, she has found that her small pension has at least the merit of arriving regularly. She exudes, therefore, an aura of comparative prosperity. MRS. SWANSON is carrying a moving picture magazine, and on the way to the table in the centre she is trying to find something in it.]*

MRS. SWANSON: Where was that article? . . . there was photygraphs too . . . ah! 'ere it is . . . look . . . the very picture we're goin' to see this afternoon.

MAGGIE: Well, now . . . so 'tis . . . wherever didye git it?

MRS. SWANSON: Bought it, o' course . . . I allays buy it . . . every Wednesday I do. . . . What one do you buy?

MAGGIE: Oh . . . er . . . I don't buy any o' them . . . ye see . . . my Bill don't like 'em now.

MRS. SWANSON: Look at it. . . . I can hardly wait to see the picture to-day . . . isn't Adolphey Menjew wonderful? . . . so sophisticated, I allays thinks.

MAGGIE: Which one is him?

MRS. SWANSON: Why, that 'un, o' course!

MAGGIE: Oh, yes . . . 'e were on the last time I was at the movies . . . it was grand.

MRS. SWANSON: The last time! . . . why, Adolphey Menjew hasn't been 'ere for three or four weeks. . . . I never miss 'im . . . an' I go every week.

MAGGIE: I can't go every week.

MRS. SWANSON: Well, as for me, I couldn't do wi'out my show every Wednesday . . . an' it's not so bad now that it's only twenty-five cents in the afternoons.

MAGGIE: Twenty-five cents!

MRS. SWANSON: Yes . . . you know . . . that's all 'tis now.

MAGGIE: Yes . . . I know.

MRS. SWANSON: Remember when we all used to go together in the evenin's? . . . those was great times . . . seats used to cost a dollar apiece . . . an' we didn't mind. . . . Oh well, easy come, easy go.

MAGGIE: I used to try an' remember those times . . . an' tell myself that they would come again . . . my Bill 'ad a car then . . . an' Bennie an' Gertie was jist little ones . . . now they're grown up an' there's nothin' fer them . . . we all used to drive out to the country together on Sundays an' have a picnic . . . I never see the



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country now . . . I never go any place . . . except to the movies . . . when I kin.

MRS. SWANSON: There's still the movies.

MAGGIE: Yes . . . there's still the movies . . . sometimes . . . when I git to the end o' my tether . . . they stop me thinkin' . . . for a whole afternoon I kin stop thinkin' . . . an' then I kin go on agin for a while. . . .

MRS. SWANSON: Don't take on so, Maggie. . . . I was never a one to let things affect me.

MAGGIE: Why should you? . . . you've never been through it, Kate.

MRS. SWANSON: Never been through it? . . . well, I like that . . . an' wasn't my own husband killed at the war? . . . never been through it indeed!

MAGGIE: I never meant that, Kate . . . but it's because o' that that these hard years have not been hard on you . . . you've had your pension from the government every month . . . regular as clockwork it is . . . you could count on it. . . . I . . . I . . . haven't been able to count on anythin' . . . one day's work this week fer Bill . . . two days another week . . . an' none the next week, an' the next . . . we never know . . . that's what makes it 'ard . . . that's what you've never been through. . . .

MRS. SWANSON: They say it can't last much longer now, my dear.

MAGGIE: That's what they said the first year . . . an' again the second year . . . an' the third. . . . I'm sick o' hearing thim say it . . . I think it will always last.

MRS. SWANSON: But it can't!

MAGGIE: It can . . . for me! . . . I won't wear much longer . . . the first year we were cheerful about it . . . it was new . . . an' something of a

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joke to have Bill on short time . . . we had some savin's . . . an' didn't owe any money . . . we had to give up the car . . . but still Bill used to take me to the movies. . . . Then the second year came with Bill still on short time. . . . He gave up the movies . . . gave up everything he could . . . even gave up bein' cheerful. . . . I tried to hold up . . . but it were hard to see the children goin' wi'out things they needed . . . we 'ad to take them out o' school. . . .

MRS. SWANSON: It's too bad about Gertie an' Bennie . . . they were such nice kids.

MAGGIE: Nice kids . . . yes . . . do ye remember them when they were small? . . . We were so proud o' them . . . Bill an' me.

MRS. SWANSON: Ain't ye proud o' them now?

MAGGIE: I don't know . . . things is different now . . . but it ain't their fault.

MRS. SWANSON: Er . . . Maggie . . . I don't want to appear interferin' . . . but they're sayin' things about Bennie an' Gertie you ought to know. . . . Do you mind?

MAGGIE: Well . . . what is it?

MRS. SWANSON: Well . . . everyone's talkin' about Gertie goin' round so much wi' that Lil Smith . . . it won't do her no good.

MAGGIE: Perhaps it won't do her no harm, neither. . . . She's got to go some place.

MRS. SWANSON: But they goes back to Lil's flat wi' their boy-friends.

MAGGIE: I know . . . I've talked to Gertie . . . but it don't do much good no more. . . . We can't give her nothin' . . . an' Lil takes her dancin' an' things.

MRS. SWANSON: Well, I hopes as how you'll watch her . . . an' then there's Bennie too.

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

MAGGIE: Yeh . . . there's Bennie. . . . He hangs round the pool room too much. . . .

MRS. SWANSON: I heard as how he gambles down there all the time.

MAGGIE: I s'pose he does . . . but what kin I do?

MRS. SWANSON: I jist thought ye ought to know.

MAGGIE: What kin I do any more? . . . They can't git no jobs . . . an' we ain't got no money to give them. . . . What wi' one an' two days a week for Bill . . . there ain't enough comin' in to go around. . . . I can't see no end. . . .

MRS. SWANSON: But so many others hain't any work at all.

MAGGIE: I used to tell myself that . . . used to try an' persuade myself that we was better off than some others . . . but when there ain't enough to go around, it's not much better than having none at all. . . . It got on all our nerves . . . there wasn't any more happiness in the house . . . there wasn't any more home . . . an' then another year came of the same old story. . . . We jist carried on . . . day in an' day out . . . no change. . . . An' then one day I found that I jist didn't care no longer. . . . It'll go on like this forever. . . . I don't care. . . .

MRS. SWANSON: Don't ye say that, Maggie.

MAGGIE: Why not? . . . it's true. . . . There's only one thing left . . . the movies. . . . As long as I kin see the movies once in a while . . . I kin keep goin'. . . . It's nothin' much . . . yet it's ever'thin'. . . . The movies . . . when they takes them from me, I'm finished. . . .

MRS. SWANSON: Come, come, cheer up. . . . We're goin' to the movies this afternoon. . . . You'll feel better afterwards.

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

MAGGIE: Perhaps.

MRS. SWANSON: What do ye mean . . . perhaps? . . . Ain't ye goin'?

MAGGIE: I don't know quite. . . . I'll have to talk to Bill.

MRS. SWANSON: Of course you'll go. . . .

*[The back door of the house is heard slamming.]*

MAGGIE: That'll be Bill now.

MRS. SWANSON: I must go. . . . Don't come to the door. . . . I'll call for you at half-past one. . . . I'll give the bell my three rings. . . . 'Bye.

*[She goes out, L., leaving her magazine unnoticed on the table. BILL enters, R. He is a discouraged workman who has given of his best to industry for twenty years or more, only to find that, in the days of depression, there is no adequate provision made for such as he. When industry needed him it used him, and paid him something of what his ability and dependability deserved. But now that it no longer needed him more than a day or two a week, it felt no responsibility upon it to see that he was paid a wage even just above starvation level for himself and his family. BILL's very demeanour, and his present attitude to life, indicates that he has been shocked and amazed that such an undeserved fate should come to him. Inside himself he is rebellious and resentful, and the only way he can find an outlet for these feelings is to take it out on his wife and family. It is not an unusual type of outlet for such as BILL.]*

BILL: 'Ullo!

MAGGIE: 'Lo, Bill.

BILL: Ain't dinner ready?

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

MAGGIE: It's in the oven. I'll go git it.

[MAGGIE goes out to the kitchen. BILL goes to the buffet and picks up an old pipe and a used package of tobacco. He has anticipated a drag at his pipe all morning. It is the one consolation left in life for him. But he finds the package empty and disgustedly crumples it up and throws in into a corner of the room. While still looking for tobacco he picks up the vase, looks into it, and pours the coins into his hands. Then he puts them back and replaces the vase. Even his pipe is empty, so he throws himself disconsolately into a chair and waits for MAGGIE to bring him his dinner. Presently she comes in with a brown bowl in one hand and a half loaf of bread in the other, and places them on the table in front of BILL.]

BILL: Gees! Beans agin!

MAGGIE: Nothin' else in the house.

BILL: Ain't there no money left?

MAGGIE: The money was all gone on Monday.

BILL: Ain't there none left?

MAGGIE: There ain't a cent in the house.

BILL: An' I ain't got no tobacco.

MAGGIE (*pointing to the buffet*): There was some in a package over there.

BILL: Empty.

MAGGIE: Oh.

BILL: Gees! things is tough!

MAGGIE: Are they cuttin' down agin at the factory?

BILL: Yeh! The boss told me this mornin' they was goin' to lay off some more to-day.

MAGGIE: Will you be laid off?

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

BILL: Me? . . . No bloomin' likely! . . . They can't git along wi'out me. . . . Who in hell would they put on my machine? . . . I gotta hold those castings down to a thousandth of an inch. . . . 'Tain't many that can do that!

MAGGIE: What did the boss say to ye?

BILL: Oh, he's a good scout. . . . Offen stops to talk to me. . . . He's doin' the best 'e kin. . . . 'Tain't his fault there ain't more business.

MAGGIE: But what did 'e say?

BILL: Eh? . . . Jist stopped an' said things was tough . . . an' he had to lay off more men to-day. . . . Say, whatya gettin' at?

MAGGIE: Perhaps 'e was lettin' ye off easy . . . wanted to warn ye.

BILL: Aw . . . cut it out . . . not a chance.

MAGGIE: It wouldn't make much difference anyways.

BILL: Whatye mean? . . . make no difference. . . . Want me to lose me job?

MAGGIE: Two days or so a week ain't much good. We'd be better off on relief.

BILL: Me on relief! . . . Whatya talkin' about. . . . Gees! yer low to-day.

MAGGIE: If we was on relief we could git outa the rent. . . an' we could git lots o' groceries.

BILL: To hell wi' relief. . . . Now git this straight, see. . . . I allus paid my way, didn't I? . . . allus earned good money, didn't I? . . . 'Tain't my fault this 'ere depression came. . . . It'll be over one of these days, an' we'll be all right agin. . . . I ain't no one to go on relief . . . an' I ain't goin' to, see? . . . not while I have my strength.

MAGGIE: But . . .

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

BILL: I know it's been tough fer you, old gal . . . but it'll be over sometime, an' then it'll be like the old days. . . . Remember how we used to go about?

MAGGIE: They won't be back . . . for me.

BILL: Aw, cheer up. . . . Where's the kids?

MAGGIE: Jist gettin' up. . . . I called them jist afore ye came in.

BILL: Jist gettin' up? . . . An' I've put in a half day already. . . . Them kids needs to be jacked up.

MAGGIE: What's the use o' them gettin' up? . . . They got no job.

BILL: They should git a job. . . . 'Tain't doin' them no good loafin'.

MAGGIE: Where'll they git it?

BILL: Well . . . they could keep on tryin', couldn't they?

MAGGIE: They did try for two years after we had to take them out o' school. They can't keep it up forever . . . an' you know there ain't no jobs.

BILL: Well . . . it ain't doin' them no good . . . this loafin'.

MAGGIE: It can't do them no more harm . . . it's too late now.

BILL: Whatye mean? . . . too late?

MAGGIE: I'm afraid for them.

BILL: Afraid?

MAGGIE: If they could git a job, perhaps they'd be all right yet.

BILL: Sure . . . they'll be all right. . . . Say, what's on your mind?

MAGGIE: They're victims o' the depression.

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

BILL: Whatye mean . . . victims?

MAGGIE: Well . . . if there hadn't been no depression, they'da been all right, wouldn't they?

BILL: What's that gotta do wi' it? What's wrong wi' them?

MAGGIE: Did ye hear Gertie comin' in last night?

BILL: Yeh. . . . I meant to ask her about that. . . . Pretty late, wasn't it?

MAGGIE: It was nigh on three o'clock.

BILL: Gees! What was she doin' up that late?

MAGGIE: I wish I knew. . . . She don't tell me things like she used to.

BILL: Where was she? . . . Who was she with?

MAGGIE: She went over to Lil Smith's flat after supper last night. . . . S'pose they went down to the dance hall. . . . They mostly does.

BILL: I don't like that Lil Smith . . . a bit flighty, ain't she?

MAGGIE: She don't do Gertie no good.

BILL: Why do you let Gertie go round wi' her then? . . . Why don't you stop it?

MAGGIE: What I say don't do no good no more . . . an' what's the use o' naggin' at her anyways? . . . She ain't got nothin' else to do.

BILL: But what kept her so late? . . . The dance hall closes at twelve.

MAGGIE: Probably went back wi' the gang to Lil's flat.

BILL: Gees! at that time o' night!

MAGGIE: They goes back there wi' their boy friends.

BILL: But that ain't decent.



TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

MAGGIE: I don't think they is decent any more.

BILL: Whatye mean . . . ain't decent . . . what, Gertie?

MAGGIE: She's got a new coat. . . . Where'd she git it? We ain't got no money to give her.

BILL: Well . . . where'd she git it?

MAGGIE: How'd Lil Smith git a new coat if she wanted it?

BILL: Gees! Maggie. . . . Ye don't mean . . . ?

[GERTIE enters from the kitchen. She is a good-looking girl of about nineteen, smart with the type of smartness of shop girls. However attractive and gay she might force herself to be at the dance hall, she has acquired a somewhat sullen demeanour at home, as if in inner rebellion against the conditions and surroundings life has forced on her. If these conditions had not borne heavily upon her, and if the depression had not coloured all her life since leaving school, and refused her an opportunity to earn any money, she might have developed into an attractive, wholesome girl, such as her mother once was. But the same streak of ineffectiveness against long-continued buffetings is in them both.]

GERTIE: 'Lo, Mum; 'lo, Dad. (She sits down to her meal.)

BILL: This ain't no time to be comin' down.

GERTIE: Sorry, Dad. . . . Had a late night.

BILL: Yeh, you had. . . . An' where was you?

GERTIE: Down to the dance hall with Lil.

BILL: An' after that?

GERTIE: Back with the gang to Lil's flat.

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

[MAGGIE gets up and goes out towards the front door.]

BILL: What did ye do back there?

GERTIE: Oh . . . just played about . . . and danced to the radio.

BILL: See here . . . Gert . . . I don't like that gang.

[There is a pause.]

GERTIE: I'm not sure that I like them, either, Dad.

BILL: Then why not cut them out?

GERTIE: Then what? . . . Sit round here every night doing nothing?

BILL: You could find others to go round with.

GERTIE: They're the only friends I got now.

[MAGGIE returns with a coat over her arm.]

MAGGIE: What's this?

BILL: Yeh . . . where'd ye git that coat?

GERTIE: Oh, that . . . that's an old one o' Lil's.

[MAGGIE examines the label inside the collar.]

BILL: There, Maggie. . . . It's an old one o' Lil's.

MAGGIE: It ain't so old. . . .

GERTIE: . . . er . . . Lil never wore it much. . . . It didn't fit her.

[BENNIE comes in from the kitchen. He is a well set up young man of about twenty-one, but there is a troubled air about him, and he has adopted a slouching custom, which suggests he has not been able to find any niche in life for himself. As he comes in]

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

MAGGIE: Humph.

[*She throws the coat on a chair at the back.*  
BENNIE sits down to his meal.]

BENNIE: Mornin'.

BILL: 'Tain't mornin' no more. . . . This is a nice time to git up.

BENNIE: What's the use of gittin' up? I haven't any place to go in the mornings.

BILL: You might fin' things round the house to do.

BENNIE: I do what Mum asks me to . . . don't I, Mum?

MAGGIE: Sure, he does what I asks him, Bill.

BILL: I wish I could git you a job at the plant.

BENNIE: Fat chance.

MAGGIE: There ain't no jobs.

BILL: One might turn up, if you kept lookin'.

BENNIE: I've been to every place in town.

BILL: You've been to the pool room more'n any place.

BENNIE: Well . . . what of it? . . . It's some place to go, ain't it?

BILL: It don't do you no good . . . hangin' round there all the time. . . . Mind you, I ain't sayin' a game o' pool ain't all right sometime, . . . but it don't do a boy no good bein' there all the time, . . . an' it costs money.

BENNIE: It don't cost me no money. . . . I have to win!

BILL: Where do yet git the money to play?

BENNIE: Oh, the manager stakes me once in a while. . . . I help him some behind the counter, when he's out to meals, or busy.

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

BILL: Well, it ain't no good, see?

BENNIE: Aw . . . lay off, Dad. . . . I ain't got nothin' else to do.

MAGGIE: No. Bill . . . Bennie ain't got nothin' else to do. . . . What's the use o' jumpin' on 'im?

BILL: Well, why don't you play rugby like you used to? . . . That's a good game.

BENNIE: I ain't got no money to buy a suit, . . . an' the club's broke.

BILL: Gees! I'd like to buy you a suit. . . . It'd do you good to play.

MAGGIE: But we ain't got no money, Bill. . . . Have you got a three-cent stamp?

BILL: A three-cent stamp? . . . What'd I be doin' wi' a three-cent stamp!

MAGGIE: I thought ye might have one some place.

BILL: What ye want a stamp for?

MAGGIE: I was goin' to write to brother Jim.

BILL: What yer goin' to write to 'im for? . . . Mind ye . . . yer not askin' 'im for any help.

MAGGIE: I wasn't goin' to, . . . but, why not?

BILL: I pays my own way, see? . . . Allus have, haven't I? . . . an' I ain't goin' to stop now. . . ; This 'ere short time will soon be over . . . an' then we'll be all right. . . . Don't you ask Jim for no help.

MAGGIE: All right.

[BILL glances out through the kitchen door to see the time.]

BILL: Gees! I gotta git back to work. (*He feels in his pocket for his pipe, and in other pockets for any tobacco which might be there, but*

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

*which isn't. From his trousers pocket he pulls out what money he has and looks at it) An' no tobacco! . . . Maggie, have ye got ten cents so as I kin git a package o' tobacco?*

MAGGIE: There ain't a cent in the house.

*[BILL glances in a puzzled manner to the vase where he has seen some money, but evidently decides to say nothing about it. He looks at the coppers in his hand.]*

BILL: Three bloody cents. . . . That won't buy no tobacco. . . . 'Ere, Maggie, you might as well have this. . . . Git yerself a stamp. . . . 'Bye.

*[BILL goes out towards the front door. GERTIE gets up and carries some dishes to the kitchen. MAGGIE sits playing with the three cents, while BENNIE looks at her.]*

BENNIE: Mum . . . have you got any money?

MAGGIE: There ain't a cent in the house. . . . Didn't ye hear me tell yer dad?

BENNIE: I gotta have some jack.

MAGGIE: Whatya mean? . . . How much do you want?

BENNIE: I gotta have a dollar.

MAGGIE: A dollar! . . . Whatya need a dollar for?

BENNIE: I gotta have it, I tellya. . . . Haven't ye got it some place?

MAGGIE: There ain't a cent in the house.

BENNIE: Gee, I'm in a mess, Mum. . . . Haven't you even got a quarter? . . . If you could stake me to a quarter I could win a dollar playing Boston.

MAGGIE: Say, what's the trouble, Bennie? . . . Whatya got to have a dollar for?

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

BENNIE: I jist need a quarter . . . an' I can win a dollar.

MAGGIE: Yer dad has a pay-day to-morrow. . . . Perhaps I kin get a dollar then.

BENNIE: I gotta have it to-day.

MAGGIE: Gotta have it to-day. . . . Whatever for?

BENNIE: I borrowed a dollar last night. . . . Thought I could win some jack, . . . but ran into a stream o' bad luck. . . . Lost it all.

MAGGIE: Who'd you borrow it from? . . . Couldn't he wait till to-morrow?

BENNIE: It can't wait.

MAGGIE: Whatye mean, it can't wait?

BENNIE: Gee, Mum, I gotta have it to-day, didn't I tell you? . . . Haven't you even got a quarter?

MAGGIE: Lookit here, Bennie Fisher, where'd ye git that dollar from, that you lost?

BENNIE: Aw, . . . what's it matter?

MAGGIE: Where'd ye git that dollar?

BENNIE: I borrowed it from the till when the boss was out.

MAGGIE: Borrowed it from the till? . . . Why, Bennie, ye stole it!

BENNIE: Naw, I didn't, neither. . . . I borrowed it to stake myself for the night. . . . How was I to know I'd run into a string o' bad luck?

MAGGIE: An' there ain't a cent in the house.

[MAGGIE *begins to whimper. That bothers BENNIE a bit.*]

BENNIE: Gee, what'll I do? . . . Aw, fergit it, Mum. . . . I'll fix it up some way. . . . Perhaps I kin git it from some o' the gang. . . .

## TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

[BENNIE goes out to the kitchen. MAGGIE sits dazed for a minute, then finds the three cents still in her hands. She brightens up and goes over to the vase on the buffet. As she puts in the three cents she counts.]

MAGGIE: Twenty-three . . . twenty-four . . . twenty-five cents! (As MAGGIE is doing this, BENNIE appears at the kitchen door, watches Maggie and goes out again. MAGGIE gathers up the remaining dishes, but as she is about to go out with them, GERTIE comes in from the kitchen. MAGGIE puts down the dishes again) That ain't no old coat!

GERTIE: I couldn't tell Dad it was a new one, could I?

MAGGIE: Where didya get it?

GERTIE: My boy-friend gave it to me. . . . You may as well know.

MAGGIE: He gave it to you . . . what for?

GERTIE: I guess because he likes me. . . . What do you think for?

MAGGIE: Well, when I was a girl, no nice girl took presents like that from a boy.

GERTIE: Who said I was a nice girl?

MAGGIE: Gertie Fisher, whatya mean? . . .

GERTIE: Oh, Mum, what's the use? . . . You wouldn't understand. . . . Things are different now. . . . We have to live our own lives, haven't we? . . . That's what Lil says.

MAGGIE: I don't like that Lil. . . . She—

GERTIE: Why go over that again? . . . Mum, have you got any money?

MAGGIE: There ain't a cent in the house.

GERTIE: Can't you find even a quarter. . . . I gotta have it.

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

MAGGIE: But I tellya, . . . there ain't a cent in the house. . . . Whatya need it for?

GERTIE: Perhaps if I tell you, you'll give it to me.

MAGGIE: Whatya mean?

GERTIE: I gotta get some medicine Lil told me about.

MAGGIE: Medicine? . . . Whatever you want medicine for? Whatever you gettin' at? . . . oh! . . . not? . . .

GERTIE: Well, does it surprise you? . . . You know how I got that coat.

MAGGIE: But, Gertie . . . not that. . . . Oh, God! . . . Not that. . . .

[MAGGIE begins to whimper again.]

GERTIE: What's a girl to do? . . . Got to pay my way some way . . . haven't I? . . . And I never have any money. . . . Haven't you got a quarter?

MAGGIE: There ain't a cent in the house.

[MAGGIE almost breaks down. This is too much for GERTIE and she shoulders her own troubles.]

GERTIE: There . . . there . . . Mum. . . . Don't take on so. . . . It'll be all right. . . . You just go on upstairs. . . . I'll finish the dishes.

[GERTIE leads MAGGIE to the kitchen door, comes back, and dejectedly removes the rest of the dishes to the kitchen. BENNIE comes in from the kitchen, goes over to the buffet, and looks to see what is in the vase. He hears the front door slam and quickly puts the twenty-five cents into his pocket. BENNIE then turns towards the front door and meets BILL coming in slowly. BILL throws his cap into a chair and stands there looking at BENNIE.]



BENNIE: What's the trouble, Dad?

BILL: I've been fired.

BENNIE: Gee, that's tough!

BILL: Fired! . . . after twenty years! . . . and not so much as a thank you.

BENNIE: What happened?

BILL: Nothin' . . . nothin' happened, Bennie. . . . When I got back after dinner, the foreman jist told me to report to the pay office. . . . They told me I was through . . . that they had to lay off a lot more of the gang. . . . Gees! an' I didn't think they could git along wi'out me.

BENNIE: Well, how can they?

BILL: I dunno. . . . I heard the foreman was goin' to take over my machine. . . . Gees! things is tough.

BENNIE: They hadn't ought to do things like that . . . to you . . . after all the years you worked for them . . . the sons of . . .

BILL: Don't call them names, son. . . . The boss is a pretty good chap. . . . I guess he couldn't help it. . . . It's jist this 'ere depression. . . . It never give *you* a chance . . . an' now I guess it's goin to take a smack at me. . . . Well, I guess I can take it . . . but . . . after twenty years . . .

BENNIE: Dad, I need a dollar. . . . Did they give you any pay?

BILL: Pay? . . . (*BILL laughs with the nearest approach to bitterness that he has yet shown*) pay! . . . do you know what they said? . . . that there was no pay comin' to me . . . that I owed them four dollars . . . had an advance last week, an' they took it out. . . . Gees! twenty years for them . . . an' I owe them four bucks.

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

[BILL stares in front of him. BENNIE looks at him for a moment, and then]

BENNIE: I gotta go down town, . . . sorry, Dad.  
'Bye.

[BENNIE goes out front door. BILL sits staring for a minute, then shrugs his shoulders and calls out.]

BILL: Maggie! . . . Maggie!

[MAGGIE comes in from the kitchen, followed by GERTIE.]

MAGGIE: 'Lo, Bill. . . . You home?

BILL: Where'd you think I am?

MAGGIE: What's up?

BILL: I've been fired!

MAGGIE: You've been fired!

BILL: Yes, dammit, didn't ye hear me? . . . I'm fired, . . . kicked out!

MAGGIE: That was what the boss meant, then.

BILL: Eh? . . . what? . . . yes . . . I guess 'e was lettin' me down a bit . . . an' I didn't see it. . . . Gees! . . . twenty years, Maggie . . . an' they fire me wi'out a word . . . not even a thank you. . . . Gees! it's tough. . . .

GERTIE: Gee, Dad, I'm sorry!

BILL: That's all right, girlie. . . . We'll pull through . . . somehow.

MAGGIE: Did you get your pay? . . . We need some money.

BILL: There weren't no pay.

MAGGIE: No pay? . . . You mean . . . you git it later . . . to-morrow?

BILL: I don't git none at all. . . . They say I owe them four bucks. . . . Drew an advance last week, you know . . . to pay the rent.

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

MAGGIE: Oh! . . . what'll we do? . . . He ain't got no money, Gertie . . . an' there ain't a cent in the house.

[GERTIE looks at them and slowly goes out to the kitchen.]

MAGGIE: What'll we do, Bill?

BILL: I dunno. . . . I'll rustle another job, I guess.

MAGGIE: There ain't no jobs.

BILL: Oh, I dunno. . . . A good workman like me will be able to find somethin'.

MAGGIE: Bert Smith, an' Red Knowles, an' Tim Brown, an' Whitey Buck, all in this block . . . they ain't been able to find no job.

BILL: Well, I ain't goin' to give up. . . . I'll find me a job.

MAGGIE: They is all on relief.

BILL: Relief! . . . relief! . . . There you go again . . . throwing it up to me, eh? . . . that I lost my job. . . . 'Tain't my fault I lost my job, is it? . . . They didn't fire me for anythin' I done, did they? . . . Now get this straight, see. . . . We ain't goin' on no relief. . . . To hell wi' relief. . . . Go down to those blokes an' ask for a few groceries . . . me? . . . who's allus paid his way? . . . Not me! . . . I won't ask them for a goddam thing. . . . None of them will have the laugh on me. . . . We'll starve first, see?

MAGGIE: All right, we'll starve. . . . What's it matter? . . . But what about the kids?

BILL: The kids . . . the kids? . . . I'll look after the kids. . . . Allus have, haven't I? . . . And I ain't goin' to stop now. . . . They'll be O.K.

MAGGIE: They ain't O.K. now.

BILL: Whatye mean . . . ain't O.K.?

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

MAGGIE: Bennie stole a dollar from the till down to the pool room.

BILL: Bennie . . . that's why he needed a dollar Why didn't you tell me?

MAGGIE: I am tellin' you.

BILL: Bennie, . . . that's why he needed a dollar, . . . an' I didn't have none to give him.

MAGGIE: An' Gertie's in trouble too.

BILL: Gertie . . . what trouble?

MAGGIE: What trouble can a girl git into? . . . Wi' her boy friend, o' course.

BILL: With her boy friend? . . . What boy friend? . . . Whatya sayin'? . . . Come on, tell me. . . . Speak out, dammit.

MAGGIE: The boy friend what gave her the coat. . . . It weren't Lil's coat.

BILL: Gertie . . . it weren't Lil's coat? . . . She lied to me.

MAGGIE: She couldn't tell ye, could she? . . . She'd be afraid to.

BILL: An' the trouble is . . . tell me!

MAGGIE: She wants a quarter for some medicine Lil told her about. . . . She's afraid she's been careless . . . too careless . . . has to be fixed up.

BILL: My God! . . . Gertie . . . why didn't you stop it? . . . Why did you let her do it? . . . You could have done somethin', couldn't you, . . . you . . .

[As BILL speaks GERTIE comes in from the kitchen with her hat on and carrying a small suitcase. BILL sees her and stops railing at MAGGIE.]

BILL: Whatya doin' wi' that suitcase?

GERTIE: I'm goin' to stay with Lil.

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

BILL: Oh, no, you're not. . . . You're goin' to stay right here.

GERTIE: Lil wants me to stay with her. . . . She needs company . . . an' she's got a good job. . . . She can afford it.

BILL: An' you don't think I kin afford it? . . . Well, you're goin' to stay right 'ere, see?

GERTIE: You've lost your job, haven't you?

BILL: Yeh, I've lost my job, . . . but what's that mean to you? . . . Allus looked after you, haven't I? . . . Well, I ain't goin' to stop now. . . . You stay right 'ere wi' us.

GERTIE: I gotta go. . . . I can't stay here any more. . . . It ain't fair on you, Dad.

BILL: Ain't fair on me, eh? . . . You shoulda thought o' that afore ye got into trouble. . . . Yes . . . didn't think I knew, eh? . . . Thought you could lie to me about that coat, eh? . . . Well, I know . . . now, you tell me somethin', . . . who's your boy friend? . . . What's his name, eh? . . . Tell me. . . . Tell me, I say. . . . I'll deal wi' him. . . . What's his name, I say? . . . Can't you speak?

GERTIE: I ain't goin' to tell his name. . . . What's the use . . . now?

BILL: Tell me his name, you . . .

[*He takes hold of GERTIE by the shoulder.*]

GERTIE: I won't. . . . I like him. . . . He's been decent to me . . . takes me out places . . . dancing . . . and doing things. . . . I had to pay my way somehow, didn't I? . . . You don't understand. . . . Nowadays things are different. . . . Oh, Dad, you're hurting!

BILL: His name . . . dammit. . . .

[*There is a ring at the front door bell.*]

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

BILL: Who's that? . . . (*He looses GERTIE*) Go an' see who 'tis, Maggie.

[MAGGIE goes out and in a moment returns with a POLICEMAN.]

MAGGIE: He wants to see you, Bill.

BILL: 'Lo, Bob, what's up?

POLICEMAN: Nothin' very serious, perhaps . . . but wanted to see you.

BILL: Well, you jist came in time. . . . This 'ere girl o' mine wants to leave 'ome. . . . Says she's goin' to live in a flat wi' a girl friend. . . . You tell 'er she's got to do as I says.

POLICEMAN: How old is she, Bill?

MAGGIE: She'll be nineteen . . . come the nineteenth of next month.

GERTIE: That means I'm of age, doesn't it? . . . I can do as I like, can't I? (*The POLICEMAN nods his head*) There, Dad . . . you see . . . you can't stop me.

BILL: Can't stop you, eh? (*BILL steps towards GERTIE*) I'll show you if I can stop you or not. . . . I'll . . .

POLICEMAN: Careful there, Bill!

BILL: Sure . . . Bob. . . . Gotta be careful. . . . Don't want to scare the kid. . . . Gertie's a good girl. . . . She'll stay wi' her dad.

MAN: Sure, she's a good girl. . . . She'll what's right, . . . but I want to talk to you,  
ll.

MAGGIE: It'll be about Bennie, won't it?

POLICEMAN: Oh, you know about it? . . . Yes, Bennie's in a little trouble . . . a little matter about some money at the pool room. . . . Can it up, I guess . . . but I gotta see Bennie. Where is he?

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

[GERTIE gives a gasp of dismay when she hears this news, and makes a dash for the front door, carrying her suitcase, and snatching up her coat as she passes it. BILL makes an attempt to reach her, but the POLICEMAN hets in his way.]

POLICEMAN: Hold hard, Bill. . . . You can't do POLIC' y' now. . . . See her later an' talk to her. nothin'

[BILL looks wrathful for a minute, but then gives 'em.]

BILL: Yeh, I guess you're right.

POLICEMAN: Where's bt 'n'nie? . . . I gotta see 'im.

BILL: He's gone down town, I guess. . . . You musta passed 'im.

POLICEMAN: Then I'll have to go down an' find him. . . . Comin' wi' me?

BILL: Eh? . . . Sure . . . I'll come wi' you. . . . Do what I can. . . . The bloody little fool.

POLICEMAN: I guess we can fix it up. . . . Let's git goin'.

[BILL goes to pick up his cap, and rather automatically finds his pipe in his pocket and puts it in his mouth. Then he realises he has no tobacco. He looks at MAGGIE and glances at the vase on the buffet.]

BILL: Got ten cents for a bit o' 'baccy, Maggie?

MAGGIE: There ain't a cent in the house.

BILL: But . . . oh, what's the use! . . . come on, Bob!

[BILL and the POLICEMAN go out the front door.]

[MAGGIE sits at the table, low and dejected. The door-bell rings three times, but MAGGIE pays no attention to it. In a moment it rings

## TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

*three times again, and MAGGIE realises it is MRS. SWANSON'S signal. Her face brightens, and her whole attitude becomes more hopeful. She hurries to the kitchen, and comes back quickly with her hat and coat. She puts them on and fusses with her hat before the mirror in the buffet. Then she carries the vase to the table and goes to pour out the money into her hands. When nothing comes, she shakes it puzzledly for a second, and then, as realisation comes to her, she drops it to the table. She drops into a chair, where she sits for a moment staring in front of her; then, with a partially smothered cry of distress and anguish, she throws her head on her hands and sobs. The door-bell rings three times, as*

CURTAIN





# TIME'S VISITORS

by

F. SLADEN-SMITH

Well known as an adjudicator at Drama Festivals; Director of the Unnamed Society's Little Theatre in Manchester; and the author of a great number of one-act plays.

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## CHARACTERS

(in order of appearance)

FATHER TIME, *a statue*

COLLINS, *a Park Keeper*

MR. SHAPSTAKE }  
MR. WHITTELNIP } *two business men*

NELLIE }  
CISSIE } *children*  
HAROLD }

FIRST YOUTH

SECOND YOUTH

AN AUTHOR

EVIE

ARTHUR

FIRST CLERGYMAN

SECOND CLERGYMAN

AN OLD LADY

HARRIET

HER FRIEND

## TIME'S VISITORS

SCENE: *A small public garden in a big city. In the centre, surrounded by a border of flowers, stands a statue of TIME with his scythe. The statue is leaning over a plain block of stone in which is a clock of simple design with the numbers represented by small squares. (This clock should be a "practical" one—the hands worked from the inside.) Underneath the statue is a park seat. On either side are flower beds and then trees. At the back one sees the park railings and behind them forbidding-looking warehouses.*

*As the curtain rises, COLLINS, the Park Keeper, slowly walks across the stage, left to right, spearing paper, etc., on his spiked stick, on which are several tram tickets. He sings softly the song "Turn on, turn on old Time". Then, with a friendly nod to the statue, he goes off on the right, passing two business men, who enter, importantly.*

NOTE: *All stage directions from the auditorium.*

FIRST BUSINESS MAN: *As I was saying, Mr. Shapstake, the whole tendency of the market is jumpy—extremely jumpy. There is no security nowadays; there is simply no security. Not a thought of it. We've got to grab orders whenever we can and as best we may.*

SHAPSTAKE: *Very true, very, very true, Mr. Whittelnip. We can't afford to miss any opportunity or to waste a single moment.*

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**WHITTELNIP:** We certainly can't. (*Stopping to begin an anecdote*) Now, take only yesterday. I was thinking of 'phoning young Bateson about those 29-inch bales I was telling you about. Well, do you know, I sat in the office and thought and thought, but I couldn't make up my mind. No, I could *not* make up my mind. That's where I made my mistake. I shouldn't have thought and thought. I should have acted at once. When I *did* 'phone at last, Bateson had sold out. Sold out! I was a fool; I don't mind admitting it. I thought too long.

**SHAPSTAKE:** Oh, it certainly doesn't do to delay matters. Up and doing and at once is the only rule. This is an age of hustle, there's no doubt of that.

**WHITTELNIP:** And it's amazing what you miss even if you do hustle.

**SHAPSTAKE:** Oh, it is, it is. Still, after all, one can't be everywhere at once, can one?

**WHITTELNIP:** No . . . that's just the pity of it. (*Looks at clock*) Good lord! Half-past twelve already—at least, I think so. Can you make out that clock? Why don't they have proper numbers. All this modern nonsense. . . .

**SHAPSTAKE** (*peering at the clock*): Yes, it's half-past twelve all right. And I ought to have seen Somersgill before this.

**WHITTELNIP:** And I have an engagement with Slatterson and Slatter at twelve-forty-five. Confound the time; always later than you think it is! Do you happen to know exactly where Slatterson and Slatter's office is, Mr. Shapstake?

**SHAPSTAKE:** Oh, yes, Mr. Whittelnip, know it well. I'll take you there; it will be a pleasure. It's on my way. (*As they go out*) As you say, time always gets ahead of you, nowadays, worse luck. . . .

## TIME'S VISITORS

*[They exit on the left, getting rather mixed up with three children who enter at the same time.]*

NOTE: There is no need for these children to be very young; indeed, the eldest, NELLIE, already considers herself grown-up, and her sister, CISSIE, and her brother, HAROLD, are only a year or two younger. They can be played by any youthful members of the cast.]

NELLIE: Now then, 'Arold, 'urry up. None of yer dawdling.

HAROLD: I like dawdling. I'm going to have a smell at them flowers. (*Makes for flowers round statue.*)

CISSIE (*pulling him back*): You can't smell flowers in a public park; it's sinful. You do what our Nellie tells you; it's 'alf past twelve already. Time we was 'ome for dinner.

HAROLD: But I don't want no dinner, I don't.

CISSIE: Oooo, wicked again. Where do you expect to go to when you're dead?

HAROLD: Not going nowhere when I'm dead.

NELLIE: You wait till I tell Mother what you've said. I wonder that old statue doesn't come and mow yer 'ead off with his stick.

HAROLD: 'E can't. And 'e wouldn't if 'e could.

NELLIE: 'Ow do you know?

HAROLD: 'E 'asn't got the face for it. Oo is 'e?

CISSIE: Can't yer see oo it is? That's Father Time, that is. The man wot makes the clock go round.

HAROLD: Why does 'e do that?

CISSIE: 'Cos if he didn't we shouldn't know where we were.

## TIME'S VISITORS

NELLIE (*moving to right*): Now, we've done enough talking 'ere. It's late, I'm telling yer. Come on 'ome.

HAROLD: You're always saying it's late, you are.

CISSIE: And it always is late with you, yer silly.

HAROLD: Don't see no use in Time if he makes it always late for me.

NELLIE: Oh, you've got no brains, you 'aven't. It's always late with you because you're bone lazy.

HAROLD: I'd like to go to places where there wasn't any time. I 'ate time.

CISSIE: You're always 'ating something. Our Nellie, give 'im a clomp if 'e won't come.

HAROLD: If you give me a clomp, I'll go straight and pull up them nasturseums.

NELLIE: And supposing the Park Keeper saw yer? You'd go to prison on the spot.

HAROLD: Wouldn't care. Mebby there's no time in prison.

CISSIE: That's where yer make yer mistake. Why, they *call* it doing time.

HAROLD: Why should they call it that?

CISSIE (*nonplussed*): I don't know—but they do.

NELLIE: Come on, I tell yer! (*Dragging at him*) It's getting later and later.

HAROLD: I tells yer I'm not going 'ome. I don't like it. 'Ome's rotten.

CISSIE: Oooo! Wickeder and wickeder! You'll go to 'ell when you die, that's what you'll do, and then you'll find time longer and longer and longer.

HAROLD (*furious*): Don't want to go to 'ell. You all go to 'ell yourselves and time with you!

## TIME'S VISITORS

[*COLLINS enters on the right.*]

COLLINS: Now then! Now then! Did I hear swearing? What's the world coming to, I wonder? Kids, too!

NELLIE: It's only my young brother, sir. 'E's just awful. 'E 'asn't got no soul, 'e 'asn't.

COLLINS: Well, soul or no soul, I can't have him hanging round here, cussing and swearing. Look at the clock. Aren't you going home for dinner?

NELLIE: Of course we are, sir, only 'Arold was that awkward. Now then, you come along, or the kind gentleman'll give you a clop and that'll be worse than me or the statue. Cissie, 'elp me to get 'im along. . . .

[*They drag the recalcitrant HAROLD out on the right despite his loud protests.*]

COLLINS (*to the statue*): Funny thing what youngsters are coming to, nowadays, sir.

STATUE: They'll learn a few things later on. And if they don't, it will not matter very much.

COLLINS: You're right there, sir. For that class, even if they do learn something, it isn't much use to 'em. Pity they were ever born, most of 'em, but there, people are that ignorant. (*Looking on the ground*) Well, I never! There's another tram ticket! Why they can't put tickets in the box provided for the purpose on the trams, but must come and scatter 'em here instead, beats me. (*Spikes the offending ticket deftly*) And, bless me, if there isn't one further down!

[*Exit on the left, brandishing stick in readiness to impale the ticket. Enter on the left two young men, rather shabbily dressed.*]

FIRST YOUTH: Cheer up, Harry. You'll feel better to-morrow.



## TIME'S VISITORS

SECOND YOUTH: I'm not thinking of to-morrow; it's to-day that matters. Look at the time.

FIRST YOUTH: Well, I'm looking at it. Twenty-five to one, apparently.

SECOND YOUTH: Twenty-five to one! Yes, and in another hour it'll be twenty-five to two.

FIRST YOUTH: Well, what about it?

SECOND YOUTH: You know as well as I do that the results of the Beauty Coupon Competition don't come out till three. Two and a half blinking hours to wait. Strewth, it nearly kills me!

FIRST YOUTH: Why don't you smoke it off?

SECOND YOUTH: Got no fags left and can't afford another packet.

FIRST YOUTH: Here you are then. (*Offers packet.*)

SECOND YOUTH (*taking cigarette and lighting up*): Thanks. If that there coupon is right this time, you can smoke as many of mine as you like.

FIRST YOUTH: You think too much about these coupons, I tell yer.

SECOND YOUTH: And what else have I got to think of? . . . Thirty thousand pounds . . . that's what a man got last week. Thirty thousand pounds! Just for giving the names of the six most beautiful bathing belles on the South Coast. Thirty thousand! God, if I win it, I'll burst! I'm sure I'll burst! And two and a half hours to wait. . . . I wish it'd help to go up to that clock and turn the blasted hands round to three.

FIRST YOUTH: I can't think why you're so sure you'll get something this time. You've never got anything up to now.

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SECOND YOUTH: Ah, but I've got a new system. I worked it out all by myself—didn't take no advice from the papers. You see, it's like this. I've examined all the photographs of the bathing belles through a powerful magnifying glass . . .

*[They exit slowly on the right, passing an AUTHOR who has entered from the right and stands deep in a book he is reading. After the youths have gone out he begins to walk slowly across the stage bumping into COLLINS, who has entered on the left.]*

AUTHOR: Sorry, sorry and all that, but I was absorbed in my book.

COLLINS: So I see, sir. Studying hard, sir?

AUTHOR: Reviewing, really. And, for once, quite an interesting work. *(He closes the book, marking the place with a tram ticket, and looks round)* Do you know, I like your garden. It has a melancholy all its own. Your statue, of course, is a great mistake, and to add a clock is almost the last straw.

COLLINS: Why is that, sir?

AUTHOR: Quite apart from the incredible vulgarity of the effect, it's redundant. The statue of time is symbol enough, surely, of all manner of depressing things without a clock to emphasise them. For instance, who on earth wants to be forcibly reminded that this temporary absence of frost which we call summer is going, and that winter will soon supervene? This garden must be horrible in winter.

COLLINS: Well, it's not exactly a place to lounge in, but at lunch time, if it's at all fine, it's surprising how many comes and sits here for a bit.

AUTHOR: Good gracious, I don't know how they can do it. In this district what is called a warm

## TIME'S VISITORS

day is chilly enough, and, in any case, it's usually snowing again before you've left your overcoat off. (*Shaking his head at the statue*) Alas, you poor old fool; you're always making a mess of things!

COLLINS: Oh, now don't go and say that. You'll hurt his feelings. Everybody seems to have a grudge against him.

AUTHOR (*preparing to wander off*): And can you wonder? No one is the better for his activities. I mean, just think of the subject personally. Every year one's face and figure slightly worse—networks of wrinkles, bulges where there ought to be curves—disgusting. It's really too horrible to think about—besides, I really must get on with my book. (*Takes tram ticket out of book and throws it on the ground with a lordly gesture*) Good morning. (*He strolls out on the left, deep in his book again.*)

COLLINS (*looking after him sorrowfully and spiking the ticket*): So even he's a tram ticketer. I should have thought better of him.

STATUE: I saw several more stuck in the book.

COLLINS: Gosh! Perhaps I'd better follow him for a bit.

[*He steals out on the left, with elaborate caution, as a youth and a girl enter on the right, arm in arm.*]

YOUTH: Do let's sit down here for a minute, Evie.

EVIE: I'm not sure I've the time. They expect me back at the shop.

YOUTH: Oh, it'll be all right. Do let's sit here—just a moment.

EVIE: Oh, all right.

[*They sit.*]

## TIME'S VISITORS

YOUTH (*suddenly*): Oh, Evie, if you knew how much I love you! (*Embrace.*)

EVIE: Do you really?

YOUTH: Yes, really!

EVIE: *Really?*

YOUTH: Yes; like a gory furnace I do!

EVIE: Language, Arthur!

ARTHUR: Oh, everyone uses strong language when they're in love. That's what poetic licence means. Oh, Evie, give me a big, long kiss!

EVIE: It can't be too long. Think of the time.

ARTHUR: I don't want to think of time when I'm with you! (*A kiss of some intensity.*)

EVIE (*releasing herself*): Don't you never work, Arthur?

ARTHUR: I work when I can get some to do. When I can't, I just mooch round thinking of you. The days last for ever.

EVIE: They last for ever, too, in the shop. There's a clock just outside the staircase door, and whenever the door opens I look at it. And would you believe me, the hands scarcely seem to move at all—specially from ten o'clock to twelve and from three to five.

ARTHUR: How's that?

EVIE: Don't know. Expect it's because it's in the middle like. You've got over coming in and there's no thought of going out.

ARTHUR (*giving her a hug*): You're out now.

EVIE: Well, that's something special. An errand. I was surprised to see you.

ARTHUR: I'd been hanging round the shop all morning—just because you were inside.

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EVIE (*pleased*): Silly boy. (*Strokes his hair for a moment.*)

ARTHUR: Oh, Evie, won't there ever be a time when we can be together for always—not just snatching a minute, miserable-like, here and there?

EVIE: Goodness knows. Sometimes I think, maybe—but most times I think it's just hopeless! (*Dabs at her eyes*) I wish we'd never met!

ARTHUR: No, you don't, you don't. Say you don't, Evie, please.

EVIE (*looking at him*): No, I don't. I can't say that. But it's cruel the way time drags on until we do meet, and then—

ARTHUR: Oh, then time flies fast enough. (*Looking at statue*) That's him, you know, at the back there. Father Time, they call him. I'd call him something stronger than that, I would. Old idiot! Spoils everything, he does.

EVIE: Don't be silly, Arthur. It's only a statue; a statue of an idea, that's what he is.

ARTHUR: Ah, but it's an idea that's killing most of us.

EVIE: What do you mean?

ARTHUR: Look at the way our days are divided up by blasted hours. If there were no hours, nine to six, wouldn't mean nothing at all. Now, it means prison for you and hell for me.

EVIE: It's a good bit more than nine to six when we're busy, my word. . . .

ARTHUR (*reflectively*): You know, I don't think it'll always be like this—I mean, most people in rotten jobs they hate, or no jobs at all, which is worse. There'll come a time when people just won't put up with all this nonsense, and then things'll get better. (*Turning round*) Best

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thing *he* could do would be to give himself a shake and plump us two bang into the future—so we could have a bit of life worth living. Oh, wouldn't it be grand if he did! Oh, Evie!

EVIE: You're talking softer than ever—you'll end up by not being quite right in the head if you go on like this. I'd much rather you kissed me while we've got time instead of sitting there trying to talk clever.

ARTHUR: Right you are! Only too pleased to oblige!

*[A prolonged kiss during which COLLINS enters, L., and on seeing them promptly turns his back and sings loudly "Turn on, old Time", waving his stick as though conducting an invisible orchestra. The lovers break apart.]*

EVIE: That's enough now; suppose he saw us—and I've got to go at once.

ARTHUR: One more, Evie, please.

EVIE: Can't be done, Arthur. You know time's up—see me to the corner. *(She goes to the right.)*

ARTHUR *(following her)*: Time may go to blinking blazes. . . .

*[They exit, right.]*

COLLINS *(to STATUE)*: A bit hot, weren't they, sir?

STATUE: Nothing much to complain of—and, anyway, it will soon pass. They'll forget.

COLLINS: And the best thing they can do, in my opinion. He's no good, and she's only the girl in the little hosiery shop down Denmark Street. You didn't care for them, did you, sir?

STATUE: I think I did, a little. I would have liked them to be happy.

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COLLINS: Bah! No good, either of them. (*Looking at him a little anxiously*) I'm afraid I'm more of a snob than you, sir.

STATUE (*smiling*): I'm afraid you are.

COLLINS: It all comes of having been in the army. Terrible snobbish place, the army. (*Looking to right*) Well, if I haven't overlooked a regular nest of tickets by the rockery.

[*Marches off on the right as the two business men enter in a hurry on the left. Soon after the two youths enter, very slowly, on the right.*]

WHITTELNIP: Really, Mr. Shapstake, your bump of locality seems very limited indeed. Just when I've absolutely no time to lose, you take me on an absurd tour round the slums, ending up in what appeared to me to be some kind of gin palace.

SHAPSTAKE: I am extremely sorry, Mr. Whittelnip, but I was certain that was Messrs. Slatterson and Slatter's office. However, we all make mistakes, and, as I tell you, I've remembered now where they are—just over the way, in fact. Let us hurry down this path—

WHITTELNIP: Hurry? I should think we will hurry. Oh, look at the time now! Horrible! Really, I think we'd better run, although at my age it is extremely unwise and I have been repeatedly . . .

[*They run off on the right.*]

SECOND YOUTH (*looking at the clock*): Strewth! Only twenty to one. Why, it just *crawls*. I thought it would be half past two, at least.

FIRST YOUTH: You're too impatient, you are.

SECOND YOUTH: You'd be impatient if you were going to win thirty thousand pounds.

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FIRST YOUTH: I can't see why you're so sure.

SECOND YOUTH: I keep on telling you, it's the system. And not only that. Sometimes a fellow just feels something's going to happen . . . it's called second sight, and you have it if you're the least bit Scotch. Suddenly you know what's going to happen, all in a flash like—it's uncanny, but there it is.

FIRST YOUTH: But I never heard you was Scotch.

SECOND YOUTH: Grandpa met Grandma on a bus in Glasgow.

FIRST YOUTH: But that doesn't prove——

SECOND YOUTH (*interrupting*): You ain't got no faith at all. You're nothing but an agnostic.

FIRST YOUTH: Here, hold on. Just because time's going slow, you needn't get abusive. You can wear a kilt for all I care, but even a kilt doesn't prove . . .

[*They drift out on the left. COLLINS enters on the right, his stick loaded with tram tickets. He takes them off and deposits them in a wire basket labelled "Rubbish" at the side of the seat.*]

COLLINS (*as he does this*): Why they go and put a request stop opposite this garden, I don't know. You'd think people wanted to pave the paths with tram tickets the way they go on, you would, really. How on earth am I to keep the place neat and tidy when——

[*Enter on the left two elderly CLERGYMEN.*]

COLLINS (*to the first*): Oh, good morning, sir.

FIRST CLERGYMAN: Good morning, Collins. Still going strong?

COLLINS: Strong as possible, sir. Picking up



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tram tickets all day and looking after the children.

FIRST CLERGYMAN: Ah, I expect your job needs plenty of patience, but cheer up, Collins. All things pass away, you know.

SECOND CLERGYMAN: A few more years shall roll, certainly.

COLLINS (*indicating statue*): That's what he keeps on telling me.

FIRST CLERGYMAN (*rather astonished*): You mean the memorial?

SECOND CLERGYMAN (*peering at it*): Is it a memorial?

FIRST CLERGYMAN: Indeed, yes. Erected in memory of the deputy Lord Mayor of 1923. . . . But did I hear you suggest, Collins, that this statue tells you things? Ha, ha! Only your joke, I'm sure.

COLLINS: No, not exactly a joke, sir. You see, it's sometimes a bit lonely here—not everyone wants to talk to a Park Keeper; they're always afraid he's going to get at 'em for something—and so I've been in the habit of passing a few remarks to our statue.

FIRST CLERGYMAN: Ah, ha, I see. Just a mannerism, so to speak. But don't let it grow on you, Collins. You were always rather an eccentric, you know, and if you got as far as supposing the statue spoke to you in return——

COLLINS: Oh, but I got as far as that long ago, sir.

SECOND CLERGYMAN: Tut, tut! That won't do.

FIRST CLERGYMAN: Indeed, no, Collins. You must really be careful. Statues don't speak, you know.

COLLINS: Begging your pardon, but I thought they did sometimes in the Bible, sir.

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FIRST CLERGYMAN: Yes, but that's always so very different, of course. Pull yourself together, Collins, and think less of the statue and more of your duties here.

COLLINS: Yes, sir; certainly, sir. (*Looking towards the left*) Why, if it isn't those children back again! (*Bustling out, left*) Now then, where do you think you're getting to this time? . . .

FIRST CLERGYMAN: A nice man, but peculiar. Always was. Shell shock, I understand, during the Great War.

SECOND CLERGYMAN: Ah well, shell shock made so many people peculiar. God's will, of course. . . . (*Looking round*) So this is actually the site of St. Christopher's church?

FIRST CLERGYMAN: Yes, and when, most unwisely, they decided to pull it down, they went and made the space into a garden instead. Not a good change, in my opinion. Better a church for a few worshippers than a garden for many idlers.

SECOND CLERGYMAN: I agree with you. There is too much pandering to the modern love of ease and enjoyment. The passing of the years has brought few blessings, I fear.

FIRST CLERGYMAN: Hardly any at all that I can see. There's a lot to be said for the good old days, a lot.

SECOND CLERGYMAN: Very true. We are surrounded by a retrograde and purblind generation. Time brings many changes, but scarcely any good ones. (*Looking at statue*) That gentleman over there is responsible for much.

FIRST CLERGYMAN: Yes, indeed. . . . I fancy he occupies the place where the pulpit originally stood.

SECOND CLERGYMAN: A painful thought. Then the west door would be just down the path?

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FIRST CLERGYMAN: Even further, I think.  
(*Calling*) Collins! Collins!

COLLINS (*appearing, L.*): Yes, sir?

FIRST CLERGYMAN: Am I right in supposing that the west door of old St. Christopher's was near that hideous clump of rhododendrons?

COLLINS: Yes, sir. That's the very spot, sir.

FIRST CLERGYMAN (*moving towards the right*): Then we will go and examine it—it will enable us to avoid this very extraordinary female.

[*They exit, casting horrified glances at an OLD LADY who has entered on the right. She is extravagantly rouged and powdered, and wears a yellow wig. COLLINS industriously begins spiking paper, etc.*]

OLD LADY (*wagging her stick at COLLINS*): Oh, good morning, Mr. Collins.

COLLINS (*stopping in his work*): Good morning, ma'am.

OLD LADY: Still after your naughty tram tickets, I suppose, he, he! How careless people are, to be sure.

COLLINS: They are that.

OLD LADY (*stopping to take her breath*): I must say, carelessness has never been a characteristic of mine.

COLLINS: I suppose not, ma'am.

OLD LADY: Oh, dear me, no. I should never have lived as long as I have if I'd been at all careless. (*Looking at clock*) I see it is time to take my tablets—but I detest sitting near your terrible statue.

[*She sits down and takes a small bottle out of her bag.*]

COLLINS (*regarding it with interest*): Is that something you take regular?

OLD LADY: That, and other things, of course. I've something for nearly everything. It all depends on how I feel. (*Takes out a black tin box from the bag, and, opening it, shows it full of phials, packets, and pills.*)

COLLINS (*astounded*): Well, I never! And do you take 'em all?

OLD LADY: When necessary, of course. I tell you no one can be too careful. Every minute we're exposed to infection of some kind. Prevention is better than cure, and for years I've devoted my energies entirely to prevention. It pays, oh, it pays. It keeps that horrible old gentleman behind me at bay. Why, Mr. Collins, how old would you suppose me to be?

COLLINS: I hardly like to guess, ma'am.

OLD LADY: I'm eighty-three next birthday. I don't wonder you're surprised, because, of course, I know he (*pointing to statue*) has had hardly any effect on me yet. But you're such a sympathetic man, Mr. Collins, that I don't mind admitting to you that it's been a bit of a struggle. (*Lowering her voice*) In fact, it's been a terrible struggle. It wears me out, but I must keep on. Why, I even don't mind admitting—but, again, only to you, of course—that although I look so well, it isn't—it isn't all *real*, Mr. Collins, he, he! if you follow me. I touch myself up a little—not enough for people to notice, of course—and my hair—well, that's scarcely my own, Mr. Collins.

COLLINS (*regarding her*): You don't say.

OLD LADY (*clenching her hands*): I just won't give in to time. I will not! I will never give in! But I get a little frightened—there are days when I have to take something every half-hour. You see, he seems to be hurrying things so.

COLLINS: What do you mean?

OLD LADY: The days simply fly past, even in the summer. It terrifies me! Does time never seem to rush on with you, Mr. Collins?

COLLINS: Not often while I'm here.

OLD LADY: Lucky man! If you knew the efforts I make to stop time rushing by me like this—but it seems useless. Each day is so precious, and over so quickly. (*Standing up*) Oh, if I could only stop this mad rush of day and night, day and night, day and night! I remember such beautiful, long days in the past! Dear me, I'm getting quite excited—another tablet, I think. The worst of it is, the tablets often do not seem to have any definite effect.

COLLINS: What'd happen if you stopped taking tablets and let time rush on?

OLD LADY: Mr. Collins! How dare you suggest such a thing. Why, I might—I might even *die*, Mr. Collins. Dear me, that excites me again . . . however, there are some little pills. . . . (*Takes a few*) My last doctors told me never to think of death for a moment—they said everything depended on the attitude of the mind. A beautiful theory, don't you think, Mr. Collins? (*Shutting up her bag*) No, I'm all right, really, if only the days wouldn't go by so quickly. I don't know how you manage to contemplate that statue and clock: I haven't had a clock in the house for years.

COLLINS: How do you know when to take your medicines?

OLD LADY: I can just hear the Town Hall chimes in the distance. Unpleasant, of course, but it helps with the dosage. Well, I must be getting on. I feel much better for the rest and the little confidential chat with you, he, he! Good-bye; you'll see me again to-morrow and again next week at the same time. I am entirely

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reliable, you know. Never missed an engagement or opportunity in my life, and never will. All due to carefulness and a few tablets. Good morning—and I'm sure I wish the Corporation would destroy your wretched statue. (*Exit, left*).

COLLINS (*slowly beginning to work again*): Don't know that I particularly want to see her again to-morrow.

STATUE: Perhaps you won't.

COLLINS (*stopping*): But all them tablets . . . ?

STATUE: They're bound to have a definite effect at last.

COLLINS: I see. (*He resumes work for a moment and then stops*) I've often meant to ask you, sir, how do you stand all this grumbling at you? It's a proper shame the way people come and curse—you ought to speak to them about it.

STATUE: I am always very patient. It would take more than curses to make me speak—except to you. We're old friends.

COLLINS (*saluting*): Not half! Thank you, sir. If it's a sign of dottiness to be able to talk to you, I hope them fools of doctors never try to cure me. (*HAROLD, followed quickly by NELLIE and CISSIE, runs in on the left*) Now then, now then, I thought I told you to go home and be good?

[*HAROLD makes the worst face he can manage at COLLINS and runs off on the right.*]

CISSIE (*out of breath*): We can't do a thing, sir, he's that awful. He won't go 'ome to dinner, and he runs that fast. . . .

NELLIE: Takes after Father, sir, that's what's the matter with 'im, and as Mother always says—oh, look! He's trying to pull up the notice

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wot says "Gentlemen"! Stop it, you wicked, naughty . . . (*Runs off on the right with CISSÆ.*)

COLLINS: Hi! Just you wait until I . . .

[*Runs out also after HAROLD. The two business men, perspiring and puffing, pass him as they enter on the right.*]

WHITTELNIP: Really, Mr. Shapstake, this is the last straw! That was a home for incurables!

SHAPSTAKE: I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Whittelnip, but I felt certain it was Messrs. Slatterson and Slatter's office. But I really do remember now, it's in East Street, I assure you it is.

WHITTELNIP: And how the deuce am I to believe that, Mr. Shapstake? I've lost all confidence in you—and I've not had to run for twenty years. Oh, oh, look at the time! I'm later than ever.

SHAPSTAKE: Well, Mr. Whittelnip, you must realise I also have missed an appointment with Somersgil, because of all this confusion. But I beg you to believe that Slatterson and Slatter's office is just at the top of East Street, and I will take you there without delay.

WHITTELNIP: Delay? After involving me in a series of back alleys of the most miserable and sordid description, you have the impudence to prattle about delay! Never have I wasted time so shockingly and outrageously, and now . . .

[*They hasten out on the left as the two YOUTHS slowly enter, passing them.*]

SECOND YOUTH (*looking at the clock*): Oh, Lord! Not much more than a quarter to—here, give me another fag. I'll give you a million Gold-flakes to-night.

FIRST YOUTH: I wish you were not so certain. The disappointment'll do yer no good.

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SECOND YOUTH: Disappointment be hanged. I tell you I've got second sight and I've got a system, and if only the damn' time would hurry up, you'd see. This waiting's a killing business. . . .

[ARTHUR enters on the right in considerable dejection. He throws himself on the seat, and, looking at the clock, pulls a scrap of paper from his pocket and apparently makes some calculations.]

FIRST YOUTH (noticing him): Looks as if he's got a system, too. . . .

[They wander off on the right. ARTHUR sighs heavily and begins his calculations afresh. The two CLERGYMEN enter on the right.]

FIRST CLERGYMAN: So you see, the unfortunate incumbent of St. Christopher's did his best, but found himself faced by a town-planning committee composed entirely of free-thinkers.

SECOND CLERGYMAN: Very shocking; if only that absurd stone gentleman would put back the clock a little, and let us return to those serene, spacious days when, thanks to established tradition and culture, people knew exactly where they were, and England . . .

[They exit on the left.]

ARTHUR (looking up from his paper): Evie left me at twenty to one. She says I may see her to-morrow at six-ten. That'll be twenty-nine and a half hours to wait—and with nothing to do. Nothing to do. Twenty-nine and a half hours, and how many minutes? How many—(Tries to calculate) Oh, I give it up! (He rises and turns to the statue) Oh, but Mr. Time, I do so wish it were now! I do so wish it were now!



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*[He walks slowly off on the right. After a very slight pause, two women enter on the left. Both have shawls over their heads.]*

FIRST WOMAN: You come and sit down here, Harriet. It won't seem so bad, maybe, after a rest.

*[They sit down together on the seat.]*

HARRIET: Things'll never be the same again, never.

HER FRIEND: Oh, I'd try not to take on so, if I were you.

HARRIET: Yes, you would. You'd take on just the same. Any woman would.

FRIEND: P'raps so . . . but we've got to be as brave as we can. It isn't as if he was the only child you'd got.

HARRIET: He was the one I loved best. True, that is. He—he appealed to me more than the others, somehow. But now . . . he's dead. I couldn't believe it when the sister told me that. "Now, Mrs. Barker," she says, very quiet and solemn, "it's my duty to tell you that your son, Freddie, passed peacefully away almost as soon as we sent the messenger for you." And I was getting a bit of breakfast at the time, never thinking. . . . *(Buries her face in her hands.)*

FRIEND: It's no use, Harriet, it's no use. He had to go. It was ordained, like. Some has to go, and it's a mercy he went peaceful.

HARRIET: Things won't never be the same, they won't, never.

FRIEND: I know it's bitter hard, and he your favourite and all. But we all has troubles, the poor especially; they has 'em all the time. And the only thing is to be as brave as possible.

HARRIET: I ain't got no bravery left.

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FRIEND: Yes, you have. You've got plenty. I know you, Harriet, always a plucky one, you are. (*Looking at the clock*) Look at the time. . . . I'm afraid I'll have to go. It's my old man's afternoon at the pictures, and he wants his dinner on those days at one, sharp. I'll come back again and see if you're still here when I've got 'im off, and if you're not here, I'll know you've had the sense to go home. Bear up, Harriet, as much as you can. You ain't the only mother to lose a child, you ain't. Why, if there's a war on, they don't bother about the mothers. They kills 'em off like flies and asks for more. But it always seems as if trouble was made epecially for you and for nobody else when it comes. I must go—you'll excuse me, Harriet. . . .

[*She hurries off on the left.*]

HARRIET (*staring in front of her*): Things won't never be the same, now he's gone. Never, never. And only yesterday, at this time . . .

STATUE: I want to talk to you.

HARRIET (*looking round*): What's that?

STATUE: I want to talk to you. I've listened to a good deal of talk to-day, and now I'm going to do a little myself.

HARRIET: But who are you?

STATUE: A very unpopular person. Someone who is nearly always grumbled at and cursed—and that is so foolish. Slowly, relentlessly, things come to pass; and as relentlessly they alter. The greatest of all illusions is permanence. There can be no permanence; birth and death, order and chaos jostle each other incessantly. And for the things which happen to them, and, above all, for the foolish things they do and the calamities they bring upon themselves, men blame me,

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forgetting that without my greatest attribute, they could not live. (*He stands upright*) For I am the great healer; I am the eternal physician. Quietly, unobtrusively, moment by moment, I heal. Without my persistent comfort there could be no living; without me men would indeed go mad. Every minute which slips noiselessly by has its restorative power. I give calmness after perplexity, hope after despair, peace after strife; I soften all bitterness; I heal. If I take away, I give again; if I slay, I bring to life; above all, I give wisdom and courage. On my calm face you will see neither turmoil or fear. (*He leans over the woman*) You feel now that nothing can ever be the same, but I will teach you slowly and with infinite patience that the sharpest sorrow can melt into the gentlest memory. Even as you sit here the quiet work has begun, but it will be many months before you will feel its influence. (*He holds his cloak out over her*) Sleep now, and I will slowly renew courage in your heart. Sleep now, and I will turn your sorrow to peace, your weakness to strength. (*He wraps his cloak over her*) On time's unfathomable sea you sail, and the waters of healing are all around you. Sleep.

[*He takes away the cloak; the woman is seen asleep. He resumes his attitude as the statue; the voice of COLLINS is heard outside, singing his song.*]

COLLINS (*entering on the right*): Well, that's got rid of the kids. (*He sees the woman*) Hullo, hullo! Who is this?

STATUE: Let her sleep until her friend comes. She has had great sorrow.

COLLINS: Oh, very well, if you advise it. I'll get home for my dinner.

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STATUE: Mind you have a good one.

COLLINS: Trust my missis to see to that. Ta, ta, see you later.

STATUE: See you later.

*[Exit COLLINS on the left, singing lustily.]*

CURTAIN